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THE MYSTIC WARRIOR

JAMES OPPENHEIM

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JAMES OPPENHEIM

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TO

WALT WHITMAN

YOUR BOOK WALKS IN THE LIGHT:
LET MINE BE THE SHADOW
BESIDE IT.

PART ONE

UNDERCURRENT

The world was a dream of beauty, an ache of loveliness,
An ache that I felt in my body,
A phallic pain,
As though I must unite myself like the sky with the earth . . .
It was unbearable . . .
For everything spoke of death, everything whispered in my ears, "James,
you will die" . . .

Hence, the transciency, the will-o'-the-wisp evanescence of beauty,
The too brief morning, the shadow that grew with afternoon,
The coming of the fear of darkness, the menace of the night . . .

I lived with death and life . . .
I lay sweating and trembling in bed in blackness . . .
I moaned to myself and prayed . . .
What was that in the corner glimmering bulky and pale?
Did it move? Was it crouching? Would it come to the bedside and clutch
me?
And the window . . . who was rattling the window and beginning to push
it up?
Were those eyes in the blackness at the foot of the bed?
How should I live all night? how should I survive the ordeal?

Mother was in the next room: I might have called her . . .
I could not: I should rather die than have her know I was a coward . . .

Then, suddenly, I opened my eyes . . .
It was bright morning . . . sunlight flooded in . . .
The room was simple and sweet . . . shadows were gone . . .
The curtain was blowing in the breeze . . . was it Spring? Summer?

I smelt faint honeysuckle, I heard the gay sounds of carts . . .
My heart leaped with abandonment of joy . . .
So deep the terror, the very taking away of it filled me with laughter and rhapsody . . .
I went in bare feet on the cool floor and flung up the window . . .
I saw the glow and colour of earth, trees, countryside, roads and the sky,
I praised God without thinking of him,
I was mad with love; I wanted only to shout and dance;
I wanted only to kiss and clasp, and run down the road through the sunlight . . .

Then, after breakfast, grammar . . .
I sat under the maple tree and tried to look at my book . . .
It was meaningless . . .
My glance wandered over the glazed air of the tremulous fields,
Over the waving corn, over the green orchard, over the hills,
I saw the happy children playing down at the brook-side,
I saw a butterfly in sunlight fluttering about the porch-pillars of the farmhouse,
I saw a chipmunk flitting along the grey stone-wall . . .
Phantasy possessed me . . . I lounged and dreamed . . .
I saw that beautiful white and gold lady and her soft rose cheeks and her smiling eyes . . .
And everything was too beautiful . . .
Too beautiful the blue of the sky, green of the earth,
Too poignant the gleam of wonder in butterfly wings,
Too aching lovely the summer fields, the glaze of the morning . . .

My throat was clutched with tears . . .
I wanted to weep my life out on that gentle bosom of my dreams . . .
The pain of sex was mine . . . the mystic something that pulsed between earth and sky,
Danced in a rhythm down the wayward quick-step of the brook,

Throbbed in the glaze, waved through the leaves of the maple at the caress of the winds,
Flowed sinuous through the moving body of a young girl in shadow and shine down the road,
The beating of my heart, the quickening phallic pulsation,
The dream of nakedness in nature, of a covert in the woods, and moss, and silence,
And the white and gold body that melted coolly with mine . . .
Till the Magic Carpet of dream bore me half-delirious, half-maddened, in a strange stupor,
Into the mystic love-gardens of the Thousand Nights and One,
Whence I returned, exhausted, dull . . .

And now my great friend the sun was starting down the ominous, portentous slope . . .
He would leave me . . . he would leave me to death and darkness . . .
He would abandon me with a last backward glory of shouting colors;
Earth would grow cold, the damp edge in, the blackness take all . . .

I was an outcast, an exile, abandoned . . . there was no help for me . . .
I must go again to the Terror, I must go again to the ever-present monster of darkness . . .
I must go to the cold sweat and the incessant shivering,
I must lie and think: "I am alive now and I am I:
Suppose something kills me? Will I see it killing me? Will I know I am dead?
Or will I stop being at all?"

And at that last thought my body would become a stone of revolt . . .
I would freeze with protest . . .
What! This "I," this intensely vivid, defiant, aching, ecstatic self
To be cheaply trampled under heel, stamped out in the mud like a beetle?
Was I to be scattered, and cease?

O, only one who has felt this terror knows what it is to live!
It is when you look death in the face and recoil
That you live with sting and passion in every atom of your being . . .
I no longer know that terrible ecstasy of mere existence
When to draw a breath is a voluptuous miracle,
And such a swim of beauty pours over the brain
That only song is vent and release . . .

But I knew it then . . .
Did I say the days were happy?
They, too, held their anguish . . . anguish of desire and fear . . .
Though I loved the woods, could I venture into them alone?
Were there not chimerical beasts? Were there not snakes?
I think I was afraid of my shadow in those days . . .
I think the Dark Presence was always near me, whispering, "James, James, James, you are going to die" . . .

Always, I could love life so, because I hated death so . . .
I hated the abyss on which I walked . . .
I accused creation of treachery and malicious trickery
So to bring me to life, to offer me such a feast of beauty and joy,
To fill me with immortal delights, with loves and powers,
And then to stand back of me like a shadow tarnishing all,
Poisoning the sun and earth and the air,
Sickening my body,
Threatening to snatch me into nothingness without preparation or warning . . .
Every mouthful might be my last, every joy might be cut in career;
I was defenceless, helpless, lost and alone . . .

And nobody bothered his head about it!
Every one else went gaily along as if he were an immortal!
My neighbours were godlike in their unconscious sufficiency!
Some of them even loved to go to bed and to go to sleep . . .

What was I, so unlike them, a stranger, a coward, a despicable baby?
Or did *I* know, and *they* didn't? Was it mine alone, this ghastly secret of death?

Did I say I loved life and hated death?
Ah, not so, not so . . .
Really, I didn't know it, but I was a lover of death . . .
It is the Walts who love life; who plunge like swimmers into the sea of the roaring streets,
Who transform with immediate love the shattered and squalid slums,
Who take in their arms the roughs and cripples and monsters of the world,
Who hear in noise the music of the marching race,
And in confusion see the God at work . . .

Not I! not I!
Somewhere midway between life and death was the garden I was seeking . . .
A garden wrought all of the wonder and beauty of the earth,
Wrought of the images of mountains, meadows and cities,
And images of people,
And in the heart of it the Beloved . . .
And there I should wander and with a magic wand raise new civilizations,
Build and break empires, set armies a-clash in smoky battles,
Anoint the gods and set the dusk upon them . . .
Sit at my ease and watch the light-draped maidens dance . . .
I would be Aladdin . . .
I would be the God of the Looking-Glass World . . .

It was the "mirror held up to nature" . . . it was the world of art . . .
I was always the artist to my finger-tips . . .

Yes, I was one who hated both life and death . . .
I wanted to live in the safety within the mirror
Where the images of life and death blended in timeless beauty,
And there was neither the hard task, the heavy responsibility,
The sweat, the noise, the nervous tension of earth,
Nor yet the ghastly oblivion, the "nothing, nothing" of death . . .

What should such creatures as I do "crawling between heaven and earth"?

A widow with six children: a delicate, sensitive woman:
Americans of the middle class:
A dark and handsome family, gentle and home-loving . . .
Mother-hen with her chicks wandering from place to place, country and city . . .
But the faint stigmata of being Jews like a shadow upon them . . .

The Mother was the air they breathed, the doctrine they imbibed . . .
The quivering tentacles of her nerves were rooted in the children's hearts . . .
Her dark in-dwellings, her great fears, her loves and hopes,
Her passions, poignancies of experience,
Her mean health, headaches, colds, sore throats,
Those, and much else, entered the souls of her children . . .

Mother and I were much alike:
And yet I must be much different:
I was the eldest son, and an immense burden was laid on my shoulders . . .

What can I say of my father? He died when I was six . . .
I think of him mainly as dark and tall, with warm magnetic love,
With ringing laughter and deep-bassed singing, a vivid and brilliant person,
Passionate over his large family, a democrat and a doer;
He charms me through and through, he is strangely, lovably human,
His rough cheek rubs against mine, he smells rich of tobacco . . .

I am in disgrace: I am sent supperless to bed, and lie in blackness:
I am sobbing loud sobs of desolate exile, despairing guilt:
I may expect no mercy, no help, no assuagement nor healing . . .
My father enters softly; he lies down on the bed beside me;
He takes me in his arms . . .

I am soothed, quiet . . . I have never been so happy in all my days . . .
O, I love him . . . I have found the beloved . . .
Found the haven, the heaven of arms I long for . . .
I fall asleep on his shoulder . . .

Quiet and hush . . . it is a sunny autumn afternoon . . .
The four-story brown-stone house is uncannily silent . . .
I am a tailor: I am cutting and sewing a pair of pants for my little brother:
My aunt is there, taking my mother's place . . . both mother and father
are sick . . .
My little grandmother comes in, walks softly, inaudibly by me . . .
She carefully pulls down the shades, making the room yellow . . .

I confront her: "Why do you pull down the shades, grandma?"
It is hard for her to speak: I see red around her eyes: she is crying . . .
She says there is too much sunlight . . .

Then she looks at me, hesitates, takes me by the arm,
Whispers in my ears, "James, your father is dead" . . .

I am proud she has told me the secret . . .
I go on fitting the pants on my brother: they are rather tight for him . . .

Two days have passed . . . it is morning . . . the house is full of miracles . . .
I am led down to my mother's room: she lies in bed, so pale, so thin, so poor . . .
Her tears flow as she kisses me . . .

I smell flowers—lilies, roses, violets—I shall never forget that smell . . .
I am taken down in the long parlour where my father always sang so darkly
"Old Black Joe," and "Suwanee River," and "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground" . . .
There are people there: uncles and aunts: grandpa and grandma . . .
There are camp-stools, and a black-cloth coffin smothered in flowers . . .

I am full of wonder: my aunt raises me in her arms to say good-bye to my father . . .
I say, "Good-bye, father" . . .
She says: "Promise your father you will take his place" . . .
I begin, "I promise,"—then I see my father . . .
See his dark quiet face, the eyes in sleep, the hands laid on the breast,
The black dress-suit, the stiff collar and shirt . . .

And now my infancy is ended . . .
For this is death; I have come face to face with my enemy, death . . .
A lightning-bolt of the inexorable truth goes slaying the babe through me and through me . . .
My beloved lies dead . . . I shall never see my father again . . .
Death has taken him from me . . .

O broken heart of a child . . . even now, saying this, I go blind with hot
tears . . .
The child, held there, promising, broke in wild sobs of anguish,
And was mercifully taken away . . .

Servant-girls soothed me, saying, "He is an angel now,"
And religion began for me . . .
Like a primitive I accepted the immortality of the soul . . .

Thereafter, in dark hours, I shut myself in the little top-floor room,
And knelt and beseeched my father to come to me,
Poured my young love out of my heart's cup before him,
And a little found my God . . .

But now I must take his place: I must hurry and be a man . . .
Strange task for the dreamy little singer and artist!
I became immensely responsible toward my brothers and sisters,
Tried to companion my mother and share in her problems,
Grew sober, alert and grave . . .
And then through all the years ran this double strain:
"I must be my father," "I must be a singer" . . .
The artist and man contended in me, hating each other . . .

Out of the conflict grew the abrupt ambition,
The dream of empire and of conquest,
Of wealth, world-power, prestige,
To be all things that my little world expected of a man . . .

And against it all, I wanted, not to be my father,
But to be the child encircled by my father's love . . .
I wanted to go from the hard weary world, the torture of existence,
The clash and dust of my brain,

Into that cell of abnegation and quiet
Where the invisible Beloved hovers,
And I should give birth to the divine child,
My inspired song, my poem, born in love . . .

So I wished often I could remain a child . . .
So I wished only to be an artist . . .
And so, torn as in two, at last I merged man and artist,
And out of my art made my ambitious conquering career,
Sold my love for power, converted religion into livelihood,
And gave the artist in me to be a semi-harlot of the press . . .

It was then I had an ancient complaint called "the dead soul,"
And knew a few brittle years of hard, bright winnings . . .
Had my own family, my place in the world, my appetites,
And came to the pit of cold despair . . .

Those were my most American days:
In those days I could celebrate America with Walt's own gusto . . .
But the Walts find their souls in the huge love they pour over terrible facts,
The James's only lose their souls, being more lovers of Gods, than men . . .

I must smile now:
I suddenly see a picture of that sober little fellow
Gravely conferring with his mother . . .
He is always ready to discuss things with her:
She interests him in books and pictures:
They talk practical problems together . . .

He is, indeed, the little father . . .
He compels his brothers and sisters to join his great imaginings,
His games, inventions, plays:
He bosses them around . . .

He begins to dream of being the father of the world . . .
From the very depths of his fear of the world
Springs an ardour to conquer it . . .
He learns about Napoleon and Lincoln and Jesus Christ . . .
Shall he be a soldier, a statesman, a millionaire or a saviour?
Which father shall he be?

Demosthenes the stammerer became a great orator,
Pale sickly Bonaparte held Europe in his eagle-talons,
The crude youth of Avon wrote Hamlet and King Lear,
The railsplitter sat in the White House,
The child in the manger became the redeemer of mankind . . .
Fearful, timorous, bossy, over-masculine, shy girlish James,
Under his weight of fears, the slave of Demon Death,
By what path should he climb to the throne of God and hurl the bearded
governor from his seat?

I do not expand here:
I would sometimes stand in a dizziness and crass excitement of ambition
So great, I had rapidly to walk it off;
I could hardly at such moments live with myself . . .
I was already throned and crowned, high over the heads of the awe-struck
multitudes,
The Earth a marble in my pocket . . .

And one day I was in Central Park with my mother . . .
(Do I dream this or is it so?)
Over the walk came swinging an old giant of pink and white,

His collar open, his flowing luminous beard blowing in the wind, his head bare,
Hat in his pendulous hand . . .
And she told me he had to do this because of pains in his head . . .
Every day he walked from one end of Central Park to the other . . .
He was a poet:
His name was Walt Whitman . . .

I see him still rounding the hill poised like a sun-god against the blue sky . . .
My father had an early edition of Leaves of Grass . . .
I looked in, shocked, repelled, attracted: a burst of health seemed to envelop me:
A sea-breeze blew from that book scattering vapours of death:
I had found my opposite—it would be years before I loved him . . .

For I was lulled in old sweet songs: rhymes were like lullabies in my brain . . .
And I remember in adolescence away with my sister by a little wild lake
My one-volume Shakespeare, and the dream of magic that swept me away . . .
I could not have told what I was reading . . .
I could not grasp the plot, the thought, the people . . .
I was riding the cataracts of sheer sound, of the spheral music . . .
I wept, exulted, despaired over the drip of tones . . .

It was the same with Wagner:
My brother and I accidentally hearing Tristan and Isolde from a high gallery,
And suddenly the scarf waved and the opera house burst wide open and became the sky dense with suns,
And I rose a comet of exultant song among the audiant planets . . .

Walt has said of himself: "Whatever that boy saw, that he became" . . .
It was not exactly so with me . . .
Whatever I saw that was great, that I seemed to become . . .

I had various teachers . . .
There was one when I was fourteen:
He taught chastity, brotherhood, social work, unselfishness . . .
He lived among the poor . . .
And he was under a relentless good man of powerful brain
Who was thinking out new religions and teaching ethics . . .
A Jew, this last . . . an intellectual Messiah . . .

The Messiah-dream is deep in the Jew
For he needs a Messiah . . .
Jesus, the Jew, out of this need was born out of Jewry:
He fulfilled the Jew in himself by overcoming the Jew . . .

So, through these teachers I became puritan and good,
A saint by day, a voluptuary in secret in the fearful night,
And gradually the image of Jesus came to dominate me . . .

Gradually I blended my Napoleon, my Lincoln, my Shakespeare, my Wagner and Jesus
Into a Messiah who should conquer and save the world through song . . .
Nay, more: a Messiah who should be a song . . .

And I? I was Mary . . .
No more the father of the world, but its holy mother . . .
The sorrowing world needing to be reborn . . .

It was so I became an inspired artist . . .
Only years later could I understand what I had been doing . . .
For always in the midst of failure and fear, and when I felt trampled and despairing,

I withdrew from others in violent black mood,
I withdrew into storm-cloud,
I withdrew actually from the love of mother or wife or child
Back to the love of the shadow-parent, my God,
I entered the mirror of images,
I was enclosed in the black womb of the greater self,
I lay as one dead . . .
And then I arose and found my courage and began to struggle,
Set up in my spirit the rhythm of love with this God,
And in a spasm of the love-act and the need of birth,
This rhythm ran with words, became the rhythm of song . . .

For I had made the mystic discovery:
At thirteen years, in the wood, beside a brook,
At fifteen, in longshore streets at sunset,
At nineteen, on Morningside Heights coming from college,
The mystic vision flashed open the world . . . I saw the God in things . . .

I had come over the headlands to the shore of that silver sea
Which lies in the spirit of man,
That sea which has washed the brains of all our immortals,
Whose waves, running whitely in, break songs of the ages on our human coasts,
Bring timeless wisdom and revelation. . . .

And I, reaching into myself in darkness of storm,
Pitiably little, a waif blown out of the world,
Became one with the Daemon,
Became the supernatural mother,
And the terrific tide of song poured through me,
And I knew myself no mere mortal but a God,
And that my song was verily Christ . . .

So the defeated boy, terrified of life and of death,
The least of these, could be first;

He could in the ecstasy and agony of creation transcend mortality:
He could reach by magic the goals of ambition,
He could bring to the Earth a revelation, a religion . . .

How well this should have been
Had the fruit been equal to the vision and passion . . .
But look, here it was, the poor crude little song . . .
And the great world roared on unaware of the new-born Christ . . .

Was it then the Christ? O harrowing doubt!
Down I plunged again into the abyss of self-contempt . . .
I would turn from song, I would conquer the world direct,
I would be a man . . .

I essayed, and failed . . . song lured me again . . .
Again the storm-cloud, again the agony,
Again the triumph of music and vision . . .

And so I turned to song as the drunkard to whiskey . . .
I debauched myself with music . . .
I lived only for the terrible divine hours of Dionysiac madness . . .
Song was my comfort, my stay . . .

Not that there was no counter-current . . .
Like a drunkard, I tried to cure myself:
I was cruel in self-discipline . . .
I tried ever to live the religion of my songs . . .

To be interested in others, to join good causes, to work among the poor,
And last, and greatest, to learn how to love . . .

Love? What did I love but the God with whom I became one,
The God I almost ousted like a triumphant Satan? . . .
I sang love, but did not love . . .

And yet in a way I was all love . . .
I was all a dream of women . . .
And it was because women were so beautiful, and I beauty's slave,
That I downed them, cheapened them in my heart;
I had been lost else in the whirlpool of white bodies
Where youth goes down in desire . . .
I saved myself, turning from love of women to love of the great God . . .
To the easier love that knows no sweat and pain of the dust in it,
No nesting, mating, breeding, drudging . . .

But I *must* love: I turned, and married . . .
A little boy was born. . . . I must play the father . . .
We were poor and penniless . . . I must play the man . . .
I warped the divine song into stories of the poor which I sold to the press . . .
Harsher grew the discipline, greater the need of money . . .
We lived, not like the poor, but comfortably and middle-class . . .
I must make great swollen sums from my art . . .
More and more I must change my writing to something bright and casual . . .
I must grow more popular . . .

And as this came about, I felt for the first time death in me . . .
Something was gone . . . some precious flame was extinguished . . .

I was like a hollow shell adumbrating old echoes out of a dead past . . .
I grew listless, sick, and turned to the comforts and sleeknesses of life . . .
Now I was seeking a Saviour for myself . . .
I that had been a Saviour, now needed one . . .
In death I sought for life . . .

New knowledge came . . .
My marriage broke open and showed itself for what it was,
No marriage, on either side . . .
I had been no husband, I had no wife . . .
The marriage ended . . . I went off to a life of lonely poverty . . .
And in that life, in anguish, listening, brooding,
I heard from far-off the murmur of the divine music coming like a turning tide back to me,
I heard in my depths the pure song,
The soul returned with music . . .

I could not question: I could only give glad tears of rejoicing and joy . . .
I shaped that glory as it came: I wrought my book . . .
You may understand it now: that book of birth . . .

Is this all there is to report?
Was it all abysmal weakness and monstrous egotism?
Or is there not something in the very nature of such as I that delights in exposing frailty
Where a Walt exults in himself?

Partly that:
And partly that the world wasn't made for the Hamlets, the Dantes, the Raskolnikoffs and the Poes . . .

Through the eyes of the world they see themselves black and base . . .
They must be Gods and Demons, lest they be scum among men . . .

But these men have also the Prince in them . . .
This poor James was also charming and magnetic . . .
A handsome lad, with face like a cherub, open and generous . . .
Many women and girls could yearn over him, though they felt him too much of the spirit for passionate love . . .
He was too modest if anything, put no one beneath him, treated all alike,
Served, waited and fetched, loved to be a teacher, romped with the children,
Read poetry aloud with a sensuous voice, very musical and rich,
Had in him some gift of soothing and cooling the fever of others . . .

He would lie for hours with his boys and pat them to sleep . . .
And he had almost a genius for friendship . . .
With the true friend, he was sensitive, subtle, moving on waves of understanding,
Weaving deep talk and vistas of vision . . .
In truth, with whomever he was at the time, he identified himself
And warmly lived inside the life of the other . . .
Simple people often loved him, children came running to him . . .

He could do excellent work also in his jobs . . .
Was inventive, rapid, energetic,
Was swift to success, though in the end he turned away to his singing . . .
He could advise much with his elders,
An excellent head for the problems of others,
Much sweetness and light in him, a certain harsh vigour at times, an Olympian detachment . . .

Is that enough to fill out the other side,
To see him in his varied humanity,
His good badness, his bad goodness,

Strength and weakness—
A spirit as protean as the weather, the sea,
A child of nature, born more for the moon than the sun,
One incapable of fixed conditions, of long endurances,
Charming, unstable, churned with too great emotions, intellectual, self-conscious—
The artist, finally, the artist?

Yet what is the artist?
Is he not also the strange hero of the people,
Something more than natural, a half-god creating half-worlds whose glory leads us to new worlds?
Is he not a whimsical mystery among us,
A zigzag skating fire that disturbs our comfort,
A sacrifice for the race, whereby vision dies for no people?

He is the mystic warrior in that dark abyss where the cosmic monsters play:
Baffled and beaten and overthrown he lies down in the belly of God,
Then rises, and strikes till the blood gushes and the music runs,
And like old Prometheus he brings the fire of the heavens as a torch to the race:
Prophecy he brings from the very matrix of the dark buried Wisdom,
Revelations out of life deeper than the eyes have ever seen,
And loves unimagined before . . .

America shuns him, cutting herself off from her own greatness:
But he comes nevertheless . . . he is Walt riding on top a bus, and Poe dreaming of stars in a cottage with his wife dying,

And Emerson, absent-minded, minded of the Oversoul, in Concord woods,
And Hawthorne moody in sad Puritanism,
And Mark Twain smoking his cigars in bed, sweating and groaning over Huckleberry Finn,
And giant-like tearful Dreiser, and Sandburg sitting in a newspaper office,
And Vachel Lindsay jazzing in Paradise (or is it Springfield, Illinois?),
And Masters among all souls in strange Spoon River,
And yes, even this struggling James with his great ambitions . . .

So I speak for the artist . . .
But also I speak for the multitude like myself, with equal struggles and the same yearnings,
The same sorrows, joys and lamentings,
But no gift: inarticulate, frustrated, America's victims.

Where was I in America?
Walt went through with eyes, hands, ears all leaping from him,
Grasping the bright facets of the crowds and the shows and sights,
Intensely, concretely aware of pilots and bus-men, lilacs and thrushes,
Bathing forever in the tumults and tastes of reality . . .

But I had to stop and look if I wanted to see anything,
Stop, and pinch myself, and strain to stare at the world about me . . .
I could see it well enough, if I tried to,
I could get drunk on it all, too . . .
I could be half-crazed with the teasing of a line, a colour, the glance of a face,

Trying to set it down in words . . .
I could exult in crowds, in the sunrise, and moon on waters . . .
But this came through discipline . . .
My natural way was to go through crowded streets blind to everything,
Lost in my worrying dream . . .

I remember in early manhood how I hated America with a great hate . . .
Hated the sordid noon-streets, ugly with brick and dirt,
Filthy with people . . .
How I lived in a Settlement House among the poor, and never saw the poor
except by holding my nose . . .
Was as naturally an aristocrat as Walt was a democrat,
And only came to a passion for human causes
Through a great drenching in Lincoln, John Brown and Whitman . . .

Why record oneself like this?
Because the Great Society will have to come down from all to each:
Each, to be more than himself, must first be himself.
Out of what we are, and not out of slogans and manifestoes and creeds, may
we truly live together . . .
Walt has recorded the children of the sun: they are many . . .
I would record the children of the moon: they are very many . . .
We may only reveal our kind through revealing ourselves . . .

America is not alone a Walt, and a Franklin, and a Lincoln,
It is also a Poe, a Hawthorne: it is also I.

Art has always revealed man to man,
But we are done with the standard man, the abstract hero . . .

Today the individual must reveal his own self
If he would hold the mirror up to nature . . .

I say to my kind: Let us dare to be what we are,
Let us cease to play we are opposites of our natures,
Let us not dream we can follow a Walt down the dust of the open road,
Let us not try to be Abraham Lincolns,
Let us not mask ourselves with the masks of the great lovers:
But let us seek height inwardly, through our natural love,
Love libraries and laboratories,
Find our true friends and true gods,
Follow the devil of our dreams,
Seek freedom in our own way,
Make our lives unique gifts of power, character, works,
Give to America, which has had the sun,
Also the moon and the cloud-daubed stars . . .

We must strike free of tradition'd America, however our blood sings with it,
Strike free even of our sun-gods, Walt and Abraham,
Strike free to be ourselves, lest we lose ourselves and be nothing . . .

PART TWO

OUTER LIFE

AT 2.

A black dog and a red dress,
A big black dog and a beautiful red dress,
I am afraid of the dog,
I love the dress . . .

I scream if the dog is with me, and I scream if the dress is taken away from me . . .
I am parted from the dog: I am carried a thousand miles away from the dog:
But neither nurse, mother nor father dare to part me from the dress . . .

You see I might scream all the way from St. Paul to New York . . .
So I win my first victory, and wear the dress by day, and have it in my arms at night . . .
I wear it to shreds and patches . . .

In New York a picture is taken of me . . .
I am in a big chair and look outrageously angry, with dark large flashing eyes;
My hair is all curls about my shoulders:
I am a little beauty and somewhat of a demon . . .
But I am not in my red dress . . .

AT 3–4.

Fire-engines are on Seventieth Street . . .
Elsa and I are out, in great excitement . . .
There are crowds of people, and pumps working, and the smell of smoke . . .

We go into the house again . . .
Nurse stops me and says: "How would you like to have a new sister?"
Out of the masculine pride of four years I answer:
"I'd rather have a new brother."
"Well," she laughs, "you have a new brother" . . .
"Where is he?" I ask . . .
"Doctor brought him; he's up with your mother, and your mother is sick" . . .
I am much pleased: then nurse laughs and says:
"But you have a new sister, too:
Doctor brought two babies this time: they are twins" . . .

I am shocked at this overturn of the laws of nature,
And refuse to believe it, till, later, sure enough,
There goes nurse with a curious infant in each arm,
And when one begins to cry the other cries also as if they both were one . . .

AT 4–5.

We seem nothing but babies . . .
Ramsey at four is so weak he is in a baby-carriage,
And the twins have a double carriage between them,
And baby Doretta has a carriage, too . . .
Proudly Elsa and I walk beside this cavalcade . . .

We debouch on Central Park among a flotilla of babies,
One would think the world were very young . . .
And coming home, careless nurse spills Ramsey, and he strikes his head on the stones,
And a sweet woman takes the whole family into her house
And feeds us cookies and milk . . .

AT 4–5.

Father comes home, smelling all of tobacco . . .
He whistles in the lower hall, and pell mell we rush shouting down the stairs . . .
He lifts us one after another for a kiss . . .
Then he pulls out six toys: one for each of us:
And I am his eldest son, so I shall choose first . . .
My choice lies between a harmonica and a toy watch . . .

I am proud to have first choice: I choose the toy watch:
And then for several days I wonder why I didn't choose the harmonica . . .
Ramsey got the harmonica and can squeak with it . . .
What good is a toy watch, anyway?
Ramsey is always lucky . . .

AT 5.

Father says if I go to kindergarten all alone
I shall have a velocipede . . .

So I go all alone: I don't know that nurse is just a little behind me . . .
I go alone, and spend hours in a dream, among alien children,
Frightfully little and strange and friendless . . .
Playing with blocks and bright coloured strips of paper . . .

"Teacher, may I go to the toilet?"
Yes, I may go . . . I wander about the Normal School basement, and find a door,
And enter . . . it is a toilet . . .

A gong sounds: there is a great feminine chatter: and in rush a clutter of High School girls . . .
They gather about me and giggle and button me up . . .

I am amazed, but not too amazed to know I got into the wrong place . . .

AT 5.

Elsa and I play house . . .
We are mother and father: she tends to all the babies and woman-things,
And I go to business and come back in the evening . . .
Ramsey, who is humble and quiet, is our servant . . .
Our menial, butler, maid and nurse . . .

We take chairs, and roof them with boards and table-tops from wall to wall of the top-floor room . . .
In the center, a chair with a footstool on it is a stairway to the second floor . . .
Elsa and I live on the second floor, Ramsey dwells in the basement . . .
It is correct that the lower classes should live in the darkness . . .

Ramsey complains, but we are imperative, and attend to weighty matters upstairs . . .
But then unfortunately the house collapses and our servant is buried in the ruins and we on top of him . . .
He strikes: we have our servant troubles thereafter . . .

AT 5.

We are at Sheepshead Bay in a large hotel . . .
Ramsey and I go out on a floating wharf and sail a toy boat . . .
It swoops beyond our reach, we lean over and lose our balance and are plunged in the brine . . .
We have to be fished out and go home for a spanking . . .

I am sad and subdued that wonderful summer evening . . .
A great golden moon rises over the roofs and looks squarely in at my window . . .
I whisper to Ramsey: "See . . . that's God" . . .

Comforted by a god I lie in the golden floods of light and float off to sleep . . .

AT 6.

This is Sheepshead Bay, and still winter . . .
It is shortly after my father's death,
And my brother and I go to the rough public school where I fall in love
with the teacher . . .

And one afternoon some little boys invite us to their house . . .
I am dimly in it, some bizarre stuffiness of lace-curtains and bric-a-brac,
And these tough little worldly boys . . .

And as in a trance I hear these boys knocking asunder the world I lived in
And opening up a larger world of mystery and passion . . .
And yet so soon as I see this larger world I know it is mine also . . .

Men do it with women, they say, and men do it with men,
And boys with girls, and boys with boys,
And it's very nice and lots of fun . . .
And some fellows do it all by themselves . . .

And they give some vivid descriptions, and hand out lumps of evil-smelling
cocoanut candy,
The eating of which fascinates and sickens me . . .

Shortly thereafter my mother asks me to draw a picture,
And there is a strange half-sterile inspiration,
And I draw a sailor on the mast of a ship,
And become dizzy and stomach-sick, and have to be helped to a couch . . .

So there is a curious beginning of that conception and giving birth
Which later shall be my art.

AT 6.

My first friend!
My little brother Ramsey is saucer-eyed and thin,
But we are blood-brothers in mystery and maleness,
Fiercely against women . . .
He is five and I a little over six . . .

Our family is in Lakewood of the pines, in the house of an undertaker . . .
There was a burglary here lately, which fills my nights with terror,
And there are coffins a-making, with fine hammering, out in the stable . . .

Ramsey and I sleep together: we steal and hoard food and eat it together:
We form the N.S., the Night Society:
We have secrets together guarded from adults and children . . .
We have signal-words and love the woods and strange places . . .
In the backyard we dig in the ground hoping to strike a buried treasure
and fearful of falling through to China . . .

In the woods one day, I stumble on a curious root-clump and pick it up . . .
It looks like a Bear . . .
With my penknife I whittle it to increase the likeness . . .
Our tribe has found its Totem . . .

Now awakes in us something primeval and mystic and full of grandeur . . .
The Bear is our God, and we worship our God . . .
We keep him in a pasteboard baseball box hidden in sawdust . . .
Only behind locked doors do we take him out, and set him before us, and
reverence him with our souls . . .

He is Magic: he brings power, fertility, luck . . .

Then, one day, my practical eldest sister discovers the Bear
And throws him away . . .

Ramsey and I never recover from the blow . . .
Our religion has been smitten at the source . . .
I yearn as much for that Bear through months and years
As I yearn for my dead father.

We friends share the sorrow, however,
And in our sorrow the strength of friendship is revealed to us,
And this friendship becomes for me the archetype of the perfect friendship of the later day.

AT 12.

There is a spaciousness of silence
In those respectable brown-stone streets
That border Central Park . . .
This nun-like island of stone in the brawling city
Is chaste, subdued, well-dressed, indoors . . .
Neither crime nor sin nor cold nor hunger nor nature
Has entrance here . . .

Here I am marooned for a winter, with my grandparents and uncles . . .
Mother and the children are south, and I, the trouble-maker, am left behind . . .
I go to a private school, and to dancing school, and am more respectable than I ever was before
Or ever shall be again . . .

Strange, long, vast-shadowed winter!
Opposite is an orphan asylum, with now and then a peering face at a window . . .
I shudder to think of a lock-step childhood in uniform . . .
I read Little Women, but hide such a sissy book from my uncles . . .
I practise piano in the great dark marble-tiled hall
And sweat with terror lest a burglar seize me from behind . . .

My Grandmother is my friend: she is little, about my own size: very wise and sweet . . .
I have a great theory: I tell her that gentle persuasion works with children better than violence . . .
She agrees with me, so I trust her to the limit . . .
Then, one day, I am impudent and she slaps me in the face . . .
That slap still stuns me when I think of it . . .

Losh! what good German pastry she bakes of Fridays! . . .
How fragrant and spicy and shining is the ground-floor kitchen . . .
And the servants—how friendly and comfortable they are . . .

When all go out at night, and I am shut out of the kitchen floor with the big lonely house about me,
I call up the servants, and they bring their beaux, and I sit shyly and listen and laugh . . .
And when I must go to bed, Nora goes up with me,
And at times even lies down at the foot of the bed to keep me company . . .

How I wish I might hug her: I am all aching for a woman . . .

One day in the private school I call a girl a big fool;
The children are gathered in a row and the teacher tells me publicly to apologize or I shall be dismissed . . .
I speak up stoutly: "But she is a big fool;
And George Washington couldn't tell a lie, and neither can I" . . .

So I am out of that school, and go to public school,
After an interlude with a tutor . . .

I have dear squat Teutonic Professor Paul to teach me . . .
He is very fond of me, and teaches me about rhythm and rhyme . . .
I astound him with an inspired song, "The Shipwreck,"
It ends dramatically:

> "There came a sound like distant thunder:
> The vessel struck, and all went under . . .
>
> Where were the women in this commotion?
> Corpses in the dreary ocean!"

I am sick: he cheers me: he will paint a picture of cherubs to hang on my wall . . .
For days I lie there dreaming of those cherubs,

But he forgets his promise . . . an unfilled blank lies for months in my heart . . .

In the dancing school, I fall in love with a curly-haired girl . . .
She dances the skirt-dance in an accordion-pleated dress . . .
She dances near me: I am swathed with fire . . .
I am invited by a boy-friend to afternoon tea to meet her . . .
We three sit silent about a little table . . .
This love is unspeakable, I walk in dreams . . .

One night my beloved darling aunt sleeps with me . . .
I promise her not to kick her . . . I lie stiff as a poker . . .
But what strange wonderful forbidden feelings are mine!

And Spring comes and my mother and the children,
And I cease being the "only child" . . .
My mother finds me a different being, polite, attentive, respectable . . .
I am mannered for at least three weeks, and then I am outrageous again, a young fiend . . .
She says tartly: "I knew it wouldn't last" . . .

AT 13.

Ramsey, Helen, Doretta, Robert—
Such is my family . . .
Mother and my eldest sister Elsa are down in New York:
But I have taken the four younger children up to a back-country farm at Coxsackie . . .
And I am a little over thirteen . . .

The simple old reddish farm-house is set, porchless, in grass,—meadow and orchard . . .
It is a simple and unspoiled pastoral country, dreaming with peace . . .
One hears no sound on a warm day save bees humming, leaves stirring, grasses waving,
A cow's moo, a chick's cluck, a woman's voice . . .

We city children run loose . . . plays and dreams . . .
Twice of hot days we bathe and splash in the mud-bottomed creek . . .
At sunset we sit at the farmhouse doorway on the grass: the farmer smokes his pipe:
We see the earth dreaming of the loves of Spring,
And the sky troubled with other worlds . . .

But in these days it is darkness we love . . .
We have two adjoining rooms: the three boys in the big one, the two girls in the little one . . .
The girls have an old-fashioned bed, and the five of us in the hot night and in our nightgowns
Stretch side by side, I in the centre . . .
And I tell stories . . . strange, long, endless stories of magic . . .

I am in love with my youngest sister: the stories are about her and me . . .

I am in love with her, and I wonder, locked in with her of a breathless afternoon

Why I feel guilty and flushed, hugging her and kissing her,
And why, later, my mother forbids it,
And why, sent then to take French lessons of a yellow-haired girl in the village,
I fall madly in love with my teacher . . .

But mother is far away: and I am the mother and father of these children . . .
For once, I am happy . . . I am nested among my little lovers . . .
And I am full of dawn . . . the sunrise of sex is turning my childish world into startling and divine beauty . . .
I am suddenly aware of a magic cry in the blood and a panting of the spirit . . .
I am thrilled with the colours and forms of the earth, cloud-puffs, apple-blows, bird-notes . . .

O what a dawn! Coming up in the river-boat, at five in the morning, I went up to the prow,
And there lay smooth clear waters of the Hudson in cool shadows of dark mountains,
And dawn was reverential and grey with awe . . .

As I stood, the child fell away from me, I had the first of my new births . . .
I knew now that to be human meant something full of dream and fire,
And that male and female struck mad music from each other . . .

So, lying in the orchard, under floating clouds, and clouds of blossoms,
And full of honeysuckle perfume and sounds of bees,
A first vivid passion wrought ecstasy in me,
And poetry was born . . . I had to sing strange things on paper . . .
My purpose and my life-work came to me . . .

So this happy interlude between a dark childhood and a darker youth . . .

AT 15.

There is a Boys' Club that meets of Sunday nights
About our fiery teacher, the Settlement Head . . .
He teaches us ethics: he reads Kipling to us: he feeds us Emerson . . .
He tells us we must be pure and chaste . . .

We fall madly in love with him, for we are about at fourteen or fifteen . . .
And when we are asked by our Father of Ethics to take another teacher
We are unkind . . .

This other teacher is a quiet spade-bearded man, an educator,
Who believes in drawing out children not drenching them . . .
But we are used to the vivid exhortations that dilate our spirits,
And this man seems tame and weak . . .

Father of Ethics comes to hold an inquiry,
And our teacher waits in the hall for the verdict . . .
It is I that get up and indict the teacher . . .
He is neither Yes nor No, I say, neither black nor white,
We are not inspired . . .

So the teacher is dropped, and our beloved Emersonian is returned to us . . .

Years later, that teacher that I ousted
Shall be another father to me . . .
Even then, he spotted me with sure eye among those boys
As the one who should go some deeper, darker way
Than the way of middle-class comfort, public position and noble righteousness . . .

From then on, from afar, he watches my course,
Until our lives meet, and he sustains me at two terrible moments,
And in all days leads my thought from James to Bergson,
Bergson to Freud and Jung . . . until I may think for myself . . .

AT 15.

I am fifteen . . .
I am Private Secretary to the General Agent of the Cromwell Line
Which plies between New York and New Orleans . . .

I live in smells of the north and south, all gone briny:
The office is over the North River dock . . .
There is molasses, cotton, codfish, hides and animals . . .

I am proud to be fifteen, earning fifteen a week,
And a private secretary . . .
I got this job myself, in my first long pants;
I enchanted the chief clerk . . .

I am office-pet, everybody is fond of me . . .
It is stupendous to be down in that 'longshore world;
I love to watch the great labourers wheeling and wrestling and straining;
I love the ships salt-clean and curiously cool,
I love the stove-smell and sawdust damp in the office,
I love the red river-front, the trucks, cars, chandlers, pawnshops, Beef-steak Joes . . .

In my heart, as ever, whether in business or school or love-making,
I say to myself: "This is all very well for a while:
I am doing this because I must know about life:
It is all for my art . . ."

And so I try to get local colour . . .
I go eat in the Hole-in-the-Wall, up against a shelf, with a three-cent mug of coffee . . .
I go to a 'longshore beanery and get steamed apple dumplings . . .
All afternoon I am a little faint and stomach-sick with my lunch . . .

My mother tells me to write 'longshore poems . . .
I do . . .

"Our bones are chilly,
  The wind is cold—
(Swing your arms, oh, swing!)
We're working together,
  The young and the old,
Working like beavers,
  Working for gold.
Yoho! pile the cotton,
  The rafters ring,
Work off the numbness,
  Work off the sting
Till your pale faces glow.
    Yoho! Yoho!
Swing your arms, oh, swing!"

I begin to philosophize: I write profoundly, "Life may be short, but the day is long" . . .
This poem is accepted by a newspaper: my career has begun . . .

Thereafter I a little neglect my work . . .
I write secretly: or if matters are crowding, I go lock myself in the toilet . . .
There I am at peace, alone . . .

When I leave this job at sixteen the chief clerk says to me:
"James, you belong to a greater world than we do . . .
We'll hear of you some day: you're going to be famous."

AT 15–16.

I am obsessed these days with relatives:
On New Year's Day Ramsey and I make a grand cleaning up,
We go all over New York to aunts and uncles, and great-aunts and great-uncles, and cousins and step-cousins,
And feel that the city is a cobweb of our Jewish tribe . . .

Relatives are always showing up:
And the minute they meet you they act as if they had grown up with you and had the same parents:
They suddenly emerge from Grand Rapids or St. Louis or St. Paul or Chicago or San Francisco,
Or Baltimore or Pittsburgh or Mackinaw or Portland,
And mother must have a kaffee-klotsch and there is a terrible jabber as two or three autobiographies clash together . . .

There is something hot about Jewish life: dark rooms full of fat motherly women:
Children that are as important as their elders and talk continuously:
Great worrying sharp-voiced conversations on sickness and money,
And the doings of this relative and that,
And all close-knit in the warm communion of eating and drinking together . . .
Something tragic about it all: coarse, worldly, but streaked with mystery . . .
A sharp pride, a tremendous pride in bright offspring . . .

And I, flung so early among other peoples,
Breathing a freer air, feeling apart and curiously unlike them,
Stifle and smother in the days of enforced Jewry . . .
How did I happen to get mixed up with this?
My mother is not that way: she is refined, quiet, aristocratic,

Cultivated and intellectual, and has taken us about among farmers and doctors and teachers and other simple people . . .
Am I proud, or am I different?

I go down to Baltimore to my darling Aunt,
And lo, she has married into a veritable city . . .
One meets that family on street-car, in shop and park,
And on every street . . .

I detest it all:
I am faint with the fragrance and glamour of the stir of girls in summer dresses,
And I forget everything, but a summer night in Electric Park with my Aunt and Uncle
And my heart throbbing with desire, and the long breezy ride home in the open trolley car,
My Aunt close beside me, and I loving her and loving the touch of her . . .

AT 16–17.

I am starved for love:
I feel that I must have affection or perish: I am distraught with sex:
I am so starved for love that the word "love" never passes my lips,
And if I happen to hear it, I blush . . .

Looking from the top-floor window out on Seventy-Ninth Street on a snowy day
I see a young girl running, her fur about her neck blowing . . .
She goes into the area-way of the house just opposite . . .

It is love at first sight for me . . . one evening in the drug store
She goes out as I go in . . . she is very pretty, innocent and coquettish . . .
I am charmed and stricken . . .

Sometimes I see her glance from a window: I even think she looks at me with interest . . .
I build a great romance in secret . . .

How shall I meet her? I have a bold design . . .
I write on a slip of paper:
"Can't exist on one smile a month" . . .
But then, my nerve fails, I do not send it . . .
So I go about, passing my mother, my heart thumping with my shameful secret . . .
For what would my mother say if she knew?

One day, my mother, in ghastly perturbation, calls me to her . . .
My brothers and sisters are there . . .
"Here," she says, "what does this mean?"
And she hands me the slip of paper, the "Can't exist on one smile a month" . . .
I blush to the roots of my hair and half-swoon with shame and horror . . .
"Nothing," I mutter and go out . . .

From then on the air of approaching tragedy begins to pervade the house . . .
I marvel at my mother's strong feeling, and am ashamed and sullen . . .
But six years later I shall marry the girl across the street.

AT 17.

I have devised a stratagem for meeting the girl across the street;
Ramsey and I are keeping the house open for the summer: the rest are away . . .
And now it is Fourth of July and Ramsey is away . . .
I have the great gloomy, the empty menacing house to myself . . .

So I invite the girl's little sister over, and she brings her friends,
And we have a sticky taffy-pull on the gas-stove in the hot summer afternoon . . .
Late in the afternoon I sit alone on the stoop, smoking,
The empty house on my back . . .

Children are playing in the gutter, wagons pass,
The cable cars thump along the avenue,
The stoops are thick and dark with families . . .

The stratagem works: out of pity the elder sister of the girl comes over to the lonely lad who was so good about taffy-pulls,
And I am invited to supper . . .

For the first time I sit in that basement dining-room, in glare of gas-flame,
In jollity of family fun, a bit Falstaffian,
And beside me sits She . . . I talk, true enough, but without being there at all . . .

That evening she and I walk down Lexington Avenue and get a soda . . .
We talk everything and nothing . . .
The next night I try to kiss her, and am cast out for a three days' cooling . . .

When Ramsey returns he is amazed and hurt to find his comrade, male like himself,
Betraying the sex for a mere girl . . .

AT 18.

We are two brothers, and I the elder:
We commute all summer to a bay a little behind Coney Island . . .
In our boarding house is a man with a wax nose and a blind wife . . .
The boarding-house landlady is so fat she has to be wheeled about . . .
The food is bad . . . there are mosquitoes . . .

I am blindly sad, but every evening my brother and I set out over the long foot-bridge across the bay . . .
People are trudging: in the twilight the rockets break in the sky . . .
The sea-wind comes freshly in the summer evening . . .
We are soon with music and darkness and stars and the sea . . .

And on Sunday afternoon we are on the porch of the hotel along the beach . . .
The world is a burst of shine, vivid and dazzling . . .
As we come up the side-porch, we see, between pillars, the bright blue sea,
We take great gusts of wind through our clothes and over our faces,
We smell the cool salt in the hot summer air . . .

I am dreaming: I do not know it, but I have gone down to the magic dream of the Greek . . .
The everlasting rolling of the sea, the ever-shining heavens, the ever-living gods,
And he, Narcissus, leaning over the water . . .

Such a yearning is in me, I long for I know not what,
Beauty again, and nakedness, and passion, and song . . .
Something removed from pink wax noses, mammoth landladies,
Commuting crowds, hotel porches, business . . .

We round the corner: and in the corner sit man and wife and young daughter . . .

And I look at that dark girl and she looks at me . . .
And a mystic fatal flash goes through me, a magic love,
And we burn into each other . . . and I pass . . .

Thereafter I go often, seeking . . . she is never found . . .
I only know she is dark and strange and beautiful and wistful . . .
I only know the pain in her face that is also the pain in my heart . . .
I only know I have found myself in another . . .
Narcissus leaning over the water . . .

AT 19.

Now youth is devastated
And when I come home in the evening it seems to me that the brownstone house is a windy tomb,
Cold, and creeping with a damp horror,
Silent with the unspeakable . . .

There is sickness in the house, and one must tread lightly in monstrous shadow . . .
My brothers and sisters are heavily sad at sight of me: they look at me reproachfully . . .
Evil must be in me, even as in the house our family lies under some ancient fate . . .

My dreams break, and my heart, as I come out of the blowing evening in the free streets . . .
To be nineteen, with one's spirit galloping the world on a wild horse,
Ambitious, passionate, in love,
And all life sexually dream-coloured,
And to have the ordeal of standing in silence before a sick mother,
Charged with her sickness,
And love and hate contending,
So that death even appears as a friendly escape,
It is so I share youth's struggle . . .

A pin-point of light in the dreary large shadow of room,
And my pale mother with a towel bound round her head . . .
I had promised to take my father's place . . .
There was nothing in the bond that spoke of my falling in love with a young girl,
Nothing in the bond saying I should seek a life of my own . . .

And so my mother and I are ending the great primeval duel together;

Shall the future live for the past, or the past go down in sacrifice under young feet?
Shall I live her life or my own?
May I blame her for her love and need of me,
Or blame myself for the cruel new life that kills old loves?

I love her for all that has passed:
I hate her for all that must be:
In a weakness of love I grow hard and icy and aloof
Instinctively fighting the first great battle of youth . . .

She has met the inexorable: not I, but youth,
And in impotence before it, sickens, and thinks it is I:
I am blood-curdled with my own impersonal cruelty . . .

This is killing her, she gasps . . . and I half believe it . . .
I go angry to my room, and lock myself in . . .

Soon the house will be broken up: I shall go down to the West Side Settlement,
And know the first naked loneliness of my life . . .
The hot warmth of a big family shall be taken from me . . .
I shall feel very little and bitter cut off from the source and nest of my existence.

AT 19–20.

Old days on the West Side,
Old nights,
Summer nights when there was a faint Coney Island stir down electric-lit Eighth Avenue . . .
A moth-stir, flame, shadow, Bagdad . . .

I am the uptown youth in the slums . . .
I am a moth myself . . .

I go to certain dark street-corners under the steady silent explosion of pale blue arc-lights . . .
I am all one ache and yearning for beauty,
And beauty to me means the naked body of a woman . . .

And something more . . .
Some madness, some intoxication of passion, some wind of cool music,
Something of the breath of sandalwood burning and of Circe singing,
Or Arabian night of camel bells, laughing darkness, murder, adultery,
And drunken lovers on a divan . . .

To me, shut out of life by dreams,
It seems that even to touch a living warm body would shake me with madness . . .

I stand, timid, afraid . . . the prostitutes go by . . .
Their eyes, blue with electric light, seem alluring,
There is bewitchment of voluptuous curve, breath of perfume . . .
I send a dream upon them, they become star-like . . .

I nod to one . . . we are actually walking together . . .
I hardly look at her, I am flushed and weakened . . .
We turn down a mysterious dark side-street, we are in an entry,

The key turns, doors open, we are in a large dim room . . .
She is trying to sing, but only coughs . . .

There is a stale odour of cheap cologne and lard and soiled clothing . . .
A furniture and carpet smell, a smell of damp walls and broken plumbing . . .
A faint breath of reality touches and disturbs me . . .

I look at the woman . . . she is angular, tall and thin,
Her flushed cheeks hardly need the rouge, her bright eyes the belladonna,
She is a consumptive . . . my passion is repulsed and dies out of my body . . .

I become my teacher, the Christ-like Settlement Head,
I am blind with tears of pity . . .
I am all for saying, "Go, and sin no more" . . .

She sees I am disappointed and tries to excite me . . .
She grows pathetic: she tells me she needs the money . . .
I give her the money, and kiss her forehead, and tell her to take care of herself . . .

"Can't I do anything for you?" she asks . . .

"Nothing," I say . . .

"Can't I even strip and stand naked before you?" . . .

"No," I say, "I only hope you'll be all right . . ."

I am satisfied: she sees a Christ in me:
She weeps, enfolds me, is full of sorrow . . .

I walk home, treading on air, yet a little abashed by the tragic realities,
I go to bed, chaste and spiritual . . .
And perhaps the next night I am moth again, flame, shadow, Badgad,
One ache and yearning for beauty,
And nurse my illusions under the bluish arc-lamps . . .

AT 20.

I have been wrestling with the shadows of Teachers—
Especially that bald-headed, blue-eyed, fierce, denunciatory little man,
Expert in ethics, the Moses of a new morality,
The powerful intellectual father of a small multitude . . .

I was just twenty, and as full of evil desire as a bad egg is full of badness,
And I spent a September in the mountains as this man's secretary . . .
The Devil! he out-Christed Christ. "Thou shalt not even think of sexuality" . . .
I was indeed in an old Jewish household, where the father rules and obedience is the first commandment . . .

But I say that this man was powerful also in himself . . .
His intellect was like a mowing machine and his audience the helpless grass laid in swathes . . .
Experts came over the hills to tap his erudition . . .
He was self-disciplined so that you felt the pain and strength of it . . .
He was public-hearted, could be wonderfully simple and childlike,
Had depths of tenderness and touches of mystic warmness . . .

There he was, a giant of goodness and strength: the last of the Hebrews . . .
And there was I, wistful, lonesome, frail, be-clouded, weak,
A clumsy secretary, muffled in dreams, steeped in poetry . . .

I walked in sin: for I lusted after women . . .
In sin: for I preferred loafing to toiling . . .
In sin: my nostrils ached for anarchy . . .

My sin was the mud that shining Virtue avoided . . .
And so I wallowed in it, thinking revolt brings freedom . . .
In the rain I walked through wild forests with a young woman,
And read my songs to her, and wrestled with her to see which one was strongest,

And felt like a devil . . .

Yet, all the time, he was stamping me with himself,
I was fluid silver, and he the great minting press that clamped an image
on me . . .
Within three years thereafter I too became a shining Virtue,
And taught his ethics, and lived his morals . . .
And it took ten years of struggle to conquer that image . . .

AT 20.

I take special courses in Columbia;
In physics, I fail: I don't know what the teacher is talking about
And why he makes such a fuss about weights and measures
When the lazy sunbeam sprawls through the shaded window and the motes dance in it,
And out of doors the Hudson rolls by, and the sky is blue . . .

For I am inside a sick vision these days,
Drowning in a cairn or a tarn of Poe,
And soft with Shelley . . .
For a fine blue-eyed New Englander, a disciple of Lowell,
And bearing about him the outer coldness of that strange New England line,
And the whole code of chastity and ideal love and a misread Platonism,
Is my teacher in poetry . . . here, only, I live . . .

I muster up courage and show him my poems,
And he invites me over to supper with him and to spend an evening in his bachelor rooms,
Where all is soft lights and books and he sipping Benedictine,
And reading my songs aloud, and telling me I have the gift,
The divine fire . . .

I am overcome and exalted, for weeks I live in a realization of all dreams . . .
But somehow everything I write has the tang of Shelley in it,
Or the rhythms and colour of Poe,
Or my teacher's lyrical fervor . . .

And, besides, he tells me that when I feel a poem coming
I should take down a master and soak myself in his work,
And then write . . .

I begin to be suspicious: I begin to understand what is meant by the "danger
of becoming academic" . . .

I begin to see how native talent is corrupted,
And art rotted at the germinal core . . .

I revolt, and try to shake free, to save myself for myself . . .
But I am in such a sick stupor of dream I sit exhausted looking over the
Hudson,
And every day my head rages with voluptuous pain,
And down in the Settlement I am almost useless to the Headworker
Whose wages pay my way . . .

Riding in a street-car I look at the flaunting bold-coloured advertisements,
And their crudeness sets up a dizziness in my head and a nausea in my
body,
And I clutch the seat, and sweat, and suffer . . .
I have become too sensitive for life . . .

So, soon, I shall desperately leave all this
And go South to give myself to my art . . .

AT 21.

In Georgia, there is a town called Cuthbert,
One thousand whites, two thousand blacks,
A public square in the center with a statue of Confederate soldiers,
And over it all the lush magic of the Land of the Darkies . . .

Here I have an aunt and uncle, and cousins: the only Jews in the place . . .
My uncle has the general store and extends credit to the "niggers" for miles about:
He is loved equally by black and white,
And attends all the churches, seriatim, lest he be accused of godlessness . . .

For five weeks I try to be an artist, a pure poet,
And sit, steeped in Shelley and Poe, writing my Leandro & Beatrice . . .
At first I sleep in the lonely side of the house in a great room:
But uncle, aunt and cousins are locked in two adjoining rooms,
After my uncle has made the house secure, revolver in hand . . .

"Niggers"—I lie awake terrified all night . . .
On the third day I surrender: for the first time in my life I admit to another that I am afraid of robbers . . .
I am taken in, to sleep with my cousins: we are all warm, a nested family, with a dim light burning . . .

The woods are beautiful, but full of poisonous snakes:
I walk there with a soft-souled minister who tries to lead me to Jesus:
I reject Jesus, but am troubled, and full of those sentimental tears that drop over modern Christianity . . .
Somehow that de-deviled, de-helled, denatured world of gentle goodness
Can't be squared with nigger-horror and deadly reptiles . . .

Soft southern seminary girls in white flutter at the college next door;
I go into cool Colonial mansions and befo'-de-war, dear regal antebellum dames show me their pictures and their flowers . . .

I am uncomfortable among the bluff friendly men who chew and spit and talk women and lynching and Democratic politics . . .
The South makes me languid, the early spring with tropical beauty of purple wistaria on all the porch pillars,
Riot of roses and hyacinth in the gardens, early cotton out of the red soil,
And the strange enervating too-lush, too-abundant loveliness . . .

I am sapped of strength: I feel that my art will grow prolix and sweetish . . .
The whole dream of being another Shelley grows stale and sour in my mouth . . .
The North seems hard with pines, sea-brine, metallic and granite cities,
A sparkle of sky, a ruggedness of earth,
And battle calls me . . .

I am sick of being weak,
Of idling with tears, of writing soft sing-song,
Of sheathing myself in the southern velvet that covers the claws of a tiger . . .
I am suddenly enamoured of manhood, work, adventure, common things . . .
I will go north and marry and make good in a job,
I am just twenty-one . . . time now to be a man . . .

AT 21.

At 21 I am private secretary to a near-Napoleon,
Owner of a people's periodical, an automobile business and a suburban realty corporation,
With a model Greek-temple factory at Irvington-on-Hudson, tree-girdled, the cliff-walled blue broad Hudson rolling before it,
And his own mansion house up the hill for an office . . .

Out of dreamy youth into battle . . . I hate and love it . . .
With a head stuffed with poetry, at seven in the morning, ignoring the sun-patched river,
I turn from my lodgings up the hill to the mansion,
Climb to the second floor rear, knock at the door . . .

J. J. is yanked out of sleep, shouts "Come," I enter the door, my open note-book in my left hand, my pen in my right . . .
J. J. lifts a hand to a rack of papers behind his bed, pulls down a packet, and just as I enter the room
Begins, "My dear Mr. So-and-So, Your letter of the twentieth—"
I hobble, taking it down as I walk to my desk . . .

The stream of dictation has begun . . . it goes on irrespective of J. J.
While he gets out of bed, strips, goes behind a screen and splashes in an English tub,
Comes out, shaves, eats his breakfast, opens his mail . . .

His staff comes in, trembling: he denounces them all . . .
He gets that complete expression the artist yearns for,
And I exult in his tyranny and brutality . . .

This man is terrible: a hustler, schemer, promoter, with large vague dreams for the people,

A visionary beast, full of prophetical fire,
With a picture of Napoleon on his desk, and also, I take it, in his heart . . .
Yet I see the agonized tears roll down his cheeks over an escapade of his youngest son;
I am snake-charmed by him, a curious warm magnetic voice, an almost southern manner . . .
And I alone am exempt from his profanity,
For when he tries it on me, I resign on the spot, and he asks my pardon . . .

This man releases something in myself: when he hurls a plate at his wife at breakfast and it smashes on the wall,
When he tears with speech his bed-loving son to tatters,
When he crumples strong men with obscene wrath,
When he goes trampling down his employés,
The great beast in myself sniffs battle with his nostrils,
And I become J. J.'s tool and love the hate I evoke . . .

I browse in his library: I take down the Joy of Living by Sudermann . . .
Out of a past of grandiose poetry, of English idealism, remote romanticism,
I plunge into the modern prose and the sting and bite of the open winds of actual life . . .
Ibsen shall come next . . . and I shall grow drunk on the art of reality . . .

J. J. and Sudermann put to sleep the idealist in me,
And for the first time the masculine, modern, hard, intellectual realist, my ego,
Breaks through, crude, cruel, defiant, relentless,
And Christ gives way to the Man of Destiny . . .

Hereafter I shall know a man and a woman in myself,
And the two shall contend for mastery,
Until I cleverly blend them into Christ-Caesar.

AT 21–22.

We are three friends, and I the youngest . . .
George and I meet first: he is the eldest . . .
He was once a mid-western sheep-herder, then he did odd jobs, restaurant work, cigar-making . . .
And last he was "converted" and came into a passionate mystical love,
Worked his way through college, studied for the ministry . . .
He has the orator mouth, the public presence, the organ voice . . .
He must mother large multitudes . . .

Then, near the goal, the Higher Criticism destroys his faith . . .
He is no thinker, but a born lover:
He is manuscript clerk at J. J's . . .
Sleeping with him, I feel a warm magnetism breathe from his body across the bed to me,
A homely ample fragrance . . .

I lead him a fiend's life: I am all temperament and whimsy . . .
His very solidity provokes my most brilliant instabilities . . .
He wakes at 2 A. M. and sees me writing wild poetry on the mantel-ledge under the gaslight,
I come and go, flutter in and out, spur him and slow him,
I am rapid as a girl with him . . .

A newcomer enters the editorial offices . . .
George does not like him . . . "stuck up . . . one of these New Englanders . . . one of these Yale aristocrats . . ."
Well, he looks it: a bit of Emerson in his face . . .
And a fire in his eyes that Emerson never even dreamed of . . .
He is sensitive, yet strong, with a voice of tempered rich music . . .

The atmosphere of our one great tradition hovers about him . . .
The Emerson-Adams-Garrison-Thoreau air . . .

There comes a day of ice and demon's own north-wind,
The factory sucks in the cold and is bleak with wind-whistles . . .
My office is northermost: I sit in my heavy overcoat at my typing machine
And find my fingers too numb for work . . .
I ask J. J's eldest to give me a corner of his warmer office:
He hates me: he tells me, "no" . . .

Then the newcomer happens in upon me . . .
"You can't work here," he says . . .
I agree, I cannot . . . but I tell him what J. J's son has said . . .

He is out like a flash seeing that Managing Editor . . .
He comes back and helps me to carry my desk into the other room . . .

"How did you do it?" I ask . . .
"Oh," he smiles, "I handed in my resignation . . ."

And so there are three friends now . . .
And I shall find in friendship the one deep joy of the tragic years,
The one sustaining and enduring help . . .

He would resign for me, a stranger? What would he do then for me as
a friend?
And what may I do for him?

AT 21–22.

I am with J. J. in the flat middle of America, hot and dirty . . .
A World's Fair, the St. Louis Exposition, gross miles of glass and brick and blinding sunlight . . .
A scented hunchback secretary is there also . . .
We work in shifts . . .

J. J. is covering the Exposition: he is to write a whole number of his magazine himself
And has ten days to do it in . . .
Never done before! The biggest reporting feat in history! American with a big A!

He breezes by me on the hot plaza: I run at his heels, my note-book open . . .
We cover miles of space and speech . . .
I am his poor but gifted wife: this prodigy of virility
Pours one steady stream of seminal speech into my ear
And instantaneously out of my hand the endless infant is delivered . . .
This is being feminine, with a vengeance . . . the man in me grows bitter and hard . . .

I hate America . . . I hate the tawdry middle West, and the ignorant but not innocent provincials who crowd the trains . . .
The muddy Missouri disgusts me . . . the six-in-a-room lodging-house is an affront . . .
The Exposition is an exposure of American shabbiness . . .

Externality! externality! Goods, machinery, statistics, advertising!
The biggest on Earth, the fastest, the newest, the smartest!
Where are the cool wells in the desert and the quiet soul healed with drinks of silence and stars?
Where are shy and wilderness-wayward loves?
Beauty, thou beloved of me, where art thou?

Ye Gods, I hate J. J. . . .
We have to take in a scenic coal-mine in a rattle-trap car . . .
Says J. J. "Is the front seat more dangerous or the rear?"
"The front," says the motor-man . . .
J. J. turns to me . . .
"Then, James, you sit in the front: my life is more valuable than yours" . . .

Is it?
Ah, J. J., two weeks later I come into your feverish bedroom
And hand you my resignation . . . now you may swear at me . . .
Now, even, you may tell me that I am showing the Jew in myself . . .
Your life more valuable than mine? Well, well!

AT 23.

I have decided to marry:
I get fifteen dollars a week, teaching . . . prospects poor . . .
The future is dark: I almost believe I shall never be an artist . . .
I live in a tiny room on Park Avenue,
And am on the outs with my family . . .

But I shall marry nevertheless:
Some deep need, some sense that I must break with my adolescence,
That I must go through the common, the deep, the tragic experiences of all,
That I must taste to the roots the life of the generations,
That I must explore the biologic and human mysteries that darkly house the dumb millions,
That I must risk all on darkness and duty. . . .

Three or four times in life this "Must" hangs over me,
This inexorable demand to leave all and risk all I have . . .

So the family is reconciled, and I marry . . .
I am stirred religiously: it seems a sacrament to me . . .
The woman and I are holy beings unto each other . . .
With clear loud voice I answer the questions,
And with passion I kiss my new wife . . .

Then, off in the carriage, on the way to the hotel,
I say suddenly, with acrid mirth: "I hate you" . . .
The young wife is stung to the quick: I must make it up with her . . .
We forget that ominous beginning . . .

And the next day we are off on the Asbury Park Boat
Floating away from the city: and peace comes to me . . .
The first relief since I ceased being a boy . . .

Down at the empty beach people laugh at us; we look like brother and sister:
We are naïve and innocent children . . .
Married? Surely I am playing house again . . .

AT 23–24.

Perhaps you think it easy for a shy youth of twenty-three
To be head of an east side school of four hundred adoring girls . . .
My report is: Not so . . . it is a life of fascinating terrors . . .

To come into a classroom and have a whole class say "Ah" out of pure love,
To scold intransigent tomboys and expect at any moment a sexual attack,
To be in love yourself with certain light and dark beauties, the stars among
the clustered heads, and yet not betray it,
To have all the teachers jealous of you, and you afraid of them all,
To have to get up on the auditorium platform and show your thin legs that
quake with fright
And then to have to speak wisely, sagely, authoritatively out of a mouth
plugged tight with your heart,—
Give me my burglar on a dark night—but omit this . . .

A little Jew-lawyer, of large benevolence and nose, and endless assumption
of wisdom,
Furnishes the money and the authority . . .
I am his alter ego: together we boost the lady superintendent out of her job,
And I am installed . . .

I form clubs, I introduce an early soviet system, I speak of God and Dar-
win . . .
In short, I get into trouble . . .

The benevolent Jew denounces me from the platform before the school,
I burn up in the public gaze, as if I were being lynched with a bonfire . . .
This is too much: I resign . . .

There is a Russian revolt, not without Jewish female Trotskys . . .
I am called to the meeting of the Presidents: do I counsel violence?
My four hundred loves are ready to die for me . . .

I put on the soft pedal . . . but class by class marches spontaneously into the auditorium,
While the Board of Directors stands outside, looking in, trembling for life and limb . . .
I am called for: the school yell is given: I make a speech . . .

"Continue," I say, "the work I have begun by carrying it out in good order" . . .
I say good-bye: there is sobbing of anguish among the four hundred . . .

A Director shakes hands with me: he likes me . . .
I get into the street: a bevy of lovely girls swarms about me all the way up to the station platform . . .

I get home: I am bursting with exultation and exaltation . . .
I cry to my wife: "I'm bounced—I'm free" . . .

And so I am . . .
Never, thereafter, do I hold a job again . . .
I have decided to be a writer.

AT 24.

I am free to write at last . . .
Every morning I go up to the topfloor room and lock myself in . . .
Then I break into a sweat of fear . . .

I tremble like a guilty thing . . .
I have been in the machine so long, I am naked and afraid out of it . . .
Every morning millions of people go to work,
They earn an honest living . . .
What right have I to sit in a room and play with rhymes?

Then, again, there is a fear of something inside me . . .
There is a supernatural fear . . .
I fear the Daemon that rules the poet
And that sways him like a banner in the winds of inspiration . . .
I am afraid to let go . . . there is some taboo I must break . . .

But morning after morning I go in and lock the door,
And sweat, and fear, and stare at my paper . . .
The days pass: I have nothing to show . . .

Relatives are clamouring about duty . . .
A baby is on the way: I have no money:
How shall I look after wife and child?
I am a weakling, an idler; their worst fears of me are proved true . . .

I secretly agree with them: but I have set my teeth and go on . . .
I write light stuff and send it to the *Times* . . .
The *Times* begins to print: I deepen the dose:
They print on: I let go entirely: still they print:
And at last a new talent is blazoned forth in an editorial,
And the long career is started.

AT 24.

Yes, the child is coming . . .
My wife and I are full of awe, and not without fear . . .
It means a great imminent danger and agony for her,
And it means a complete change in our lives . . .

All of a March day we wait, and at twilight she is a stranger to me,
Cut off in some terrible universe of her own
Where I may not enter . . .
I only stand dumbly and pitiably at the edge, wrenched in spirit with the
wrenching of her flesh . . .

And I am there late at night when the baby is born . . .
I see a human body emerging from a human body,
I see the eternal chain of existence,
I see, in the last physical blinding anguish a tortured girl
Emptied of a living being which had been growing in her,
And I hear this child wail, and see it breathe and move,
And see it in the mother's arms, peacefully sucking,
And her smile for me . . .
For she has come back to my world and includes me again
And asks forgiveness for the suffering she gave me . . .

And I am broken to shreds with a sort of pity for the universe,
And pity for us, and the mystery that strives through us,
The over-shadowing doom, our helpless coming and going,
And the dumb brute miracle of being . . .

I fall over the bed, sobbing my heart out,
Prostrate before the presence of the inexorable God.

AT 24–25.

I have pushed the go-cart into Central Park
And sit there beside the drive with my sickly boy . . .

I am so overborne with the oppression of black despair
I sit, lost in a daze . . .
I cannot bring myself out of myself to see the glow and sparkle of the green
world;
Miserably I try to play with my son, speaking meaningless things . . .

Why am I so black?
Why does it seem so impossible to live among people,
To have a wife and be a father and earn my living?
Why is the child so sickly? Is he sick with the sickness in his father's soul?

What do I want? where shall I seek it?
Is it rest, or romance, or change that I need?

And then something comes over the child, he begins to tremble,
His face grows deadly white, he gasps,
He is wrenched with a convulsion, the foam flecking his lips . . .

My heart is torn open with a hot mother-love, a despairing mother-love,
I snatch him up in my arms, desperately looking this way and that . . .
An automobile is passing: I hail it: we race through the streets home . . .
I carry him up the stairs into the house to my wife . . .

He is soon all right: but how terrible life is!

AT 25.

Over the summer, my wife and I have my mother's apartment . . .
It is at least high and quiet in the sultry weather . . .
But we feel guilty . . . I am a member of the Socialist Party:
I attend meetings in back of a saloon in a density of tobacco-smoke,
I smell the smells of the workers in breweries,
And of girls who work in cigar factories . . .
I listen to interminable wranglings . . .
Is it a little like eaves-dropping?

They know it . . . they begin a movement against the intellectuals . . .
I am surprised and pained . . .

And yet I belong there . . . if they need art and knowledge,
It is I need something of earth, something primitive and crude . . .

They would repress what they lack through repressing me,
I would gain what I lack through joining them . . .

So I feel guilty about a large apartment for only three people,
And my guilt and shame are deep . . .

But deeper than guilt and shame is the trouble of life . . .
What are my wife and I but ignorant helpless children at the mercy of blundering doctors?
Our child has been sick since birth, and there has been not a night of rest,
We are thin, pale, and exhausted: we wonder how children are ever brought up . . .

And our love for that child is something really to fear,
It is so poignant, so sharp . . .
If anything should happen to him, what will happen to us?

I am so tired I cannot work: and I must work:
We are out of money, we are faced with dribbling loans and horror of dependence . . .

I write poor stuff: it does not sell: we grow despairing . . .
Then one day a Catholic paper takes a story
And saves us with seventy-five dollars . . .

But our boy? As I wheel him in his carriage along the Park
People stop out of pity . . . a blue baby . . . a baby that cannot live . . .
But he must live . . . a terrible night comes when the doctor tells us he will have pneumonia,
And of course we know what that means . . .

We are left alone: we confront each other:
We read death in each other's faces . . .
And then from despair comes desperate strength . . . we rise, and we swear we shall save him . . .

How? We do not know . . . it is mystical . . .
But we shall snatch that child from death . . .

We stay up in shifts all night, one sleeps while the other watches . . .
Slowly the summer dawn breaks, and I lean and look at the gasping child . . .
And suddenly his breathing is natural, he is sound asleep . . .

I wake my wife: we weep in each other's arms . . .
The crisis is past . . . the boy shall live . . .

Thus are children called upon to be mother and father . . .

AT 25.

Wife, child and I are at Kennebunkport
In a boarding house run by an old Maine sea-family,
Where we get young lobsters, and splendid sword-fish, and raisin-pie . . .

Pines are behind us: pines are along the road,
And a walk of a mile in the fresh-blown woods takes us out on a crescent of beach,
With horns of headland, and the great sea blue as the sea at Naples,
And the sky one crystal of blue . . .

It is a sea-place, and yet touched with the wildness of a forest-place,
And over the salty river lies the old elm-shaded port,
With its quiet colonial houses and the departed glory of Yankee clipper days . . .

And joining us, there come a young Jewish poet, and his wife, and child,
And we are all thick like honey in a pot . . .
Louis and I, marooned on the island of poetry in the modern sea of American commerce,
Hail each other like shipwrecked sailors . . .
At last we may bask and loaf in the sunshine of the Muse, our Goddess,
And talk our hearts out, and our hopes . . .

He goes over my book of verse, I over his . . .
We talk technic . . . I pull down my volume of Walt . . .
We wallow in Walt . . .
We lay down the rules and regulations of a great renaissance of poetry,
We foreshadow days of natural American song . . .

On the Maine coast, in the blue and blowing mornings, we dream those dreams
That usually wither in middle age,
But which, later amazing us both, are coming true . . .

For a great and hidden impulse shall sweep our separate singers
Until, out in the open, there is a chorus
And they that were alone find they are among many
In a new age of native song . . .

AT 25–6.

Opposite the house where my father died
Is the house where I was married
And my eldest was born . . .
Between them Seventy-Ninth Street runs from the Park to the river . . .

It is Sunday afternoon, summer, a shower has passed . . .
The broad street bears two floods from the West,
Folks and sundown . . .

My young wife and I sit in the cool dark parlour at the open windows . . .
Upstairs, our baby is sick with scarlet fever . . .

The yellow light has broken from the late blue sky,
And the washed street sparkles with glass and brick and stone,
The summer air has come over from wet park-gardens and loam;
The street laughs to our eyes and nostrils . . .

Past us, the people go home, families, lovers,
Bare-headed film-wound girls, the tired children . . .
Folks in sundown, the holiday done, trudging by to their suppers . . .
The street laughs to our souls with the people . . .

And an old sense of the folk is mine . . .
I have lived this street, first one side, then the other . . .
Here I was the little child riding a velocipede down the pavement,
And here, after absence, a youth, rewriting Shakespeare in a top-floor room,
And here, a lover, signalling to a young girl in the house across the way,
And here, after absence again, married, moved over the street,
And here I became a father and learned how to sing a sick child to sleep,
And here I lived with the simple people of my wife and tried to savour the humbler life of the city,
The workman's Third Avenue life, the crowded Saturday nights,
And here now I am writing stories of the folk,
Of mother and father, daughter and son, sister and brother,

Trying so to make of myself the good man,
The good father, the good husband, the good friend, the good citizen . . .

They go by me, the people who are shut in the world of the people,
The poor go by, seeming far from the troubled gorgeousness of the great
who bind the ages together,
And far from my deep sad trouble, which is like a shining tear in the heart
of which I sit . . .

Is it my sick child upstairs? or is it the sense of the girl who is my wife?
Or is it the past, the ghost of my father across the street?
Memories of birth and disease and death up and down the long-known
houses?
Or is it the pity of time which always forgets the people
And remembers the great only?

Or is it that through it all runs pain, and pain forever,
And decay and sickness and dying?
So beautiful and so transient and so mysterious,
Bounded by silence and by ghosts . . .

An old sense of the folk is mine.
I must take my wife in my arms
And go down to the family at supper . . .

AT 25–6.

We have taken the baby to a camp in Maine . . .
The shacks and tents are scattered in orchard and field of an old deserted farm
In the fecund pastoral country
Watered by a broad salt river that pulses with sea-tides . . .

Here are sea-winds tinctured with clover and corn and new-cut hay,
And that shining in the air and that blueness and blowing vigour which is Maine weather,
And all machinery discarded, and houses—
We sleep in the open air, mist on us or night-wind, and, between boughs, stars or a moon . . .

In the early morning the dawn wakes me: I look out and see the apple trees red-lighted and throwing long black shadows,
And the air is wine pressed from the apples, and salty, and hay-blown,
And the branches are alive with wings . . . I listen and hear
The ecstatic bobolink, and he drips lisps of ascending melody
Which at last carry him from the topmost bough and toss him up into the sky . . .

The barn is dining room: front and rear doors are open
And one looks through and sees in a frame the green field, the blue river. the cloud-bulked sky . . .
And in this place are a hundred children and men and women
Trying to mix an early Christianity with primitive America,
A wigwam life, voided of tomahawk and phallus,
And soft on the bosom of Jesus . . .

There is a beauty in running and dancing children down green fields,
And children hoeing in the garden, and folk-dancing in the firefly twilight,
And children washing dishes and singing . . .
And it is strange to see the man at the head of the camp

A veritable Jesus of the wheatfields, tall, thin, in overalls, with the suffering, gentle, bearded face,
And exquisite musical voice, and a soul as simple as a child's . . .

The woman who runs the camp is a sort of Elizabeth Barrett Browning;
She holds up the practical side of this Christianity
And makes a setting for her husband . . .
They are Tolstoyans and make their living from it
Giving the children of the rich the benefits of the great religion of the poor . . .

My wife and I ought to be happy: we are miserable . . .
We are caught in long soft sentimental floods of tears . . .
Shall I turn to Jesus? Shall I share the general castration?
Perhaps it is some sense in myself, who have often acted the Christ,
That many false Christs shall come, and that a mask is not a man . . .

Perhaps it is the artist in me that will not have life pruned and prettied . . .
Perhaps it is the aching tragedy of that Jesus of the wheatfields . . .
For he is a born poet and musician, he has the throat of his father, a flute-player,
He is made for love and song: for him beauty is religion;
And he has betrayed his singing throat to teach goodness . . .
He has taken on a crucifixion . . .

I gather darkness within me . . . one night the adults hold a meeting in the barn-loft,
And our Christ tells us that Jesus Christ lived the life of perfection . . .
Something explodes in me: I rise: I say his life was imperfect,
I say he really did not know life . . .
He neither married nor had children nor sweated for a living . . .
What did he know of the real life of man?

Some years later that beautiful and beloved betrayer of the singing throat
Carries out a poet and singer's crucifixion . . .
He dies slowly and in agony of cancer of the throat.

AT 25–6.

Strange happy days
When I have become a teller of tales
And go about the streets watching the people, the markets, the shops, the traffic,
Athrob with the great romance of life,
The beauty that winds with its mystery the commonest sights, the plainest faces,
Sense of Deeps flashing through surfaces,
And something tightens my heart with a sharp glory of this that is human,
O never too human for me . . .

I penetrate bodies and take on their histories, possessed by ghosts,
And my flying imagination builds swiftly the passions and longings and details of days,
Quarrels, love-kisses, powerful ambitions, the clash and adventure,
And beauty shot through all with the jetting scarlet of life . . .

I become full, top-heavy,
The world in my brain blots out with its ecstatic reality the world about me,
I flee contacts, I make for the topfloor, I shut myself in . . .

O that not one precious drop of vision shall be spilt idly,
Not one darling phrase, one glimpse of beauty be lost!
I pull on my pipe . . . rhythm, rhythm of the lips where words are born!
I put my pen against the virgin white paper . . .
Fear paralyzes me . . . how can I meet the responsibility of that vision vouchsafed me,
How rise level to my theme?

But I press on . . . a false start or two . . .
And then the glory begins . . .
Who knows it, but the artist?

The flood carries me; I have entered the secret essential hot core of life itself;
The pages fly . . .

I tear off coat and collar, the sweat runs, I grow white in the face,
I sicken and am flung flat on my couch . . .
But I cannot rest . . . the flood carries me up again . . .
I go on . . . it runs to four hours of madness . . . the story is done . . .

These are my true prose days
Before I must begin to make so much money
That I write to write and not because I cannot help it . . .

When I smell pipe-smoke, those days blow about me, vigorous and hardy,
Like an endless golden autumn in the lusty city.

AT 26.

In a dog-infested suburb at the end of Van Cortlandt Park,
My wife, my child and I have a clean little second-floor flat in the house of a Scandinavian carpenter . . .
It is the first time my wife and I have lived alone together . . .
I miss the busy city: I hate the spineless, dull, unthinking suburb . . .
The only escapes are the trolley cars and the woods . . .

It is autumn: a grey glisten, a wildness of asters and goldenrods, a stir of dust,
And leaves falling in the forest, and the Earth returning into itself . . .

All afternoon I read Meredith's Modern Love . . .
And my heart is terrified . . . line by terrible line I see the truth about my wife and me . . .
The tragic poem strikes open my soul, and I look in,
And see that my own darkness has become articulate,
And my marriage is ended . . .

O, for death to end it all . . . how can I go and play with the baby,
How greet my wife?
She knocks: the woods are wonderful with autumn: we must take a walk . . .

In the grey air we walk, in the glisten of the dying year,
And my soul goes down to roots, and the roots like a tree's are deep in the Earth,
And I know the Earth is deep, and breathes from the dark Mother's heart,
Breathes ages of heartbreak, and men and women destroying each other,
And enfolds them, destroyed, in her bosom . . .

I am like a weeping woman grown big with child,
And in pain, but unable to give birth . . .
Evening comes: I lock myself in my study . . .

I agonize . . . I think of rain, rain at twilight, and electric arc-lights, and
toilers coming out of a factory . . .
And I begin, and I write a story . . .

A man has beaten his wife, beaten her even the night their child was born,
And he has been jailed and has threatened to kill her when he was free . . .
On the night of rain he returns . . . she is half-fear, half-love . . .
Shall she keep her child in freedom or take up the dreadful marriage again?
He enters—the child ties them together . . . in woman's weakness she sur-
renders . . .
He, too, is a child and she is incapable of freedom when a child calls her . . .

It is so that I determine that not even the truth that I know
Shall break up my marriage . . . I give in to my mother-weakness of very
pity for wife, child and myself . . .
This is my renunciation . . .

My wife, in bed, reads the story, and it seems so vivid she believes that rain
is dashing against the windows:
I am happy and peaceful with her . . . I am content . . .

Some years must pass before the truth, revealed so cruelly,
Shall break open upon us like a long hidden wound,
And destroy our marriage before our eyes, as we stand like helpless victims
looking on.

AT 27.

Talk!
My friend and I lie on the cliffs of the Palisades . . .
And talk!

We have recovered one of the secrets of the Periclean Greeks,
The love of man for man which is rooted in the body
But raised into contactless talk . . .

It is enough to be together, to share one another in splendid speech,
To be like bodiless spirits together . . .

And such talk! Is it his gift or is it mine,
Or does the perfect friend-love strike open the very deeps in each other,
So that we are amazed to have the tang of the ages in our breath,
To issue forth art, recitatives of rhythmed speech . . .

Did the Mermaid hear such things? the Grove of Athens?
Did Goethe and Schiller speak thus together?
We have revealed, not ourselves to each other, but the race of men,
The panorama'd world, the cyclic histories,
And so, broken open, each goes home to his desk,
And snares echoes and overtones in verse and prose . . .

So we perform the office of the Logos for each other,
The divine impregnator,
And so, in bodiless love, we bear children to one another . . .

The wind of Spring blows over the Palisades,
The ruffled river sweeps far below down past the white tall city,
The grasses are sun-running, the bushes vibrate and crackle with the breeze,
Sparrows are chirping, steam goes up from the soil,
We lie side by side like belated Greeks, pulling on our pipes,
Talking, talking.

AT 27.

The wife and child have returned home: I am alone in Pittsburgh:
I am gathering facts for fiction on labour . . .
I am stunned and strange in Pittsburgh . . .
For I seem to have descended without guide into the bowels of Inferno
Where the driven souls are lashed about by the invisible whips of engines . . .

The soot is in my soul, and my soul clamours with the roll of the ten-ton ingots . . .
I have borrowed a smoky office in the Loop
And sit in grey swelling gloom of the soft-coal air
Revizualizing the white breath of burning pits,
Weave of head-lit engines in clanking railroad yards,
Wrestle of waist-nude men like shadow-fighters with steel . . .

And as I write, the door softly opens and a young woman enters,
And Pittsburgh has a burning miracle in it . . .

We go out on Sunday by car to the rough heights over Homestead,
And lie, with the holiday crowd of labourers about us,
And look down on the belching pipes and the acres of mills and the rolling freights . . .

This woman is new to me:
She is a social worker, delicate, soft-voiced, fragile,
With a certain dark beauty and stabs of intuition . . .
She meets my thoughts and feelings before they have reached my tongue . . .

I take her to her home: it is good-bye for us:
That night the sleeper will carry me back to New York . . .
We linger together, talking . . . she questions me on marriage . . .
Should she marry? should people be bound by marriage?

Could one love outside of marriage?
Is monogamy right or polygamy?

I see her face darken as I defend morality . . .
My soul darkens: I am talking against myself . . .
I am talking against a madness, a beautiful insanity,
Against a dream of a week of nights with her,
A dream of lying in the fires and smokes and thunders of Pittsburgh
Like Paolo and Francesca joined in sin in Hell forever,
Our bodies and lips triumphing over the ugliness and horror of America,
Mad love and abandonment, a dream darker than darkness . . .

But I am a moral man with wife and with child . . .
I say good-bye, and stagger away drunken and enchanted . . .
For three weeks I shall live in delirious agony plucking this passion from
my heart,
Killing another part of my soul . . .

I shall humble myself to the engines and flame-mouthed machinery . . .
I shall know Pittsburgh in my bones and in my spirit . . .
I shall wonder often, dreaming, of the beauty wasted,
The dreams dissolved in America's soul . . .
I shall even see myself as a coward who threw away his treasure.

AT 27–28.

I am getting to be a popular story-writer,
And especially for one muckraking magazine.
I go by the hour and talk with the editor . . .

He is a born teacher, of the mystical absent-minded eye-glassed manner,
A Mid-Westerner, a bit rustic, a trifle homespun,
But, if anything, too sensitive, too subtle . . .
He carries about him the blended traditions of Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain,
And he is sure that the people are good and that the people are great . . .

All things have to meet the touchstone of the farmer's wife out in Illinois,
Or the just-anybody who chews his quid and sits on a rail-fence . . .

He is very fond of me, and I of him,
And I am released to a satisfying theory of democratic art . . .
No matter what you have to say there is a way to say it
So all the people will understand . . .
It is simple enough—of course, a sacrifice or two . . .
Don't be too gloomy, and don't be sordid,
Don't open the stink-pots and the lavatories,
Don't offend people's moral scruples and religious creeds,
Keep out of politics, and sex, and socialism,
Don't be highbrow, don't end up in tragedy—
In short, uplift the people . . .

Now, since this pays, an artist can be both noble and comfortable . . .
That is, hang it! if he doesn't read Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken,
And Jean-Christophe, and Candida, and Crime & Punishment . . .
And if there weren't a strange discomfort in thinking of Walt Whitman
Sitting lonesome and poor in Camden . . .
And if in one's heart one didn't know the lie in it all . . .

When Demos is patron the artist is often a kept man,
The herd's darling or clown.

Sometimes my editor-friend grows mystical and wistful,
As if some discarded dream of his youth fell back like April rain upon him,
And I am depressed, I know not why.

AT 28.

Days of the dead soul,
Days when we had a corner in the sky on Washington Heights,
An eagle-eyrie in the north-west of the city,
And from the sixth-floor windows we saw the whole of the city
A sweeping plateau of roofs that rose in the south in towers . . .
Here one might see the pageant of light,
And the city taking its sky-baths;
Here one might muse on the separate souls that lived out their wishes under the roofs,
The tides of the millions under the skies . . .
One might look down like a sad god on the human race
Which had come from its natural home of meadow and mountain
To intensify passion and desire in a few acres of stone . . .
Which had fled from the gods and the devils and the animals and the seasons
Staking all hope for self in one another . . .
Which was used up in a colossus of machinery of which the great city was covering shell,
Which had little joy of it all, little good . . .

And unseen, above them, the seasons, the gods, the heavens went on in their courses . . .
One might behold vast destinies woven invisibly above the metropolis;
One might turn out the electric light that bound one in the room
And startling through the window came the blue-green tinge of a great moon,
And glancing out, one saw a string of lamps down the avenue,
And here and there a window-light, and shadowy hulks of houses,
And all the heavens sparkled with stars . . .
The multitude-fever folded in silence . . .

Or at dawn, holding my little boy in my arm,
We might see sunrise like a piece of music,
One note of colour after another rising to a triumphant climax—

A rosy flush along a scarf of grey spreading fanwise in the heavens,
And against the soft and deepening colour
A bird flying straight from the East,
And all the city lost in dim grey,
And chimneys smoking, a flight of ghosts . . .
In that gradual miracle my boy held up a hand and crowed,
Crowed like any astounded cock in a barnyard,
And looking, I saw sunrise in his face,
And pure joy and intuition of life . . .
And then I knew . . .

I saw it all: I could set it down in words on paper . . .
But I could not feel it, I could not share the wonder,
I could not break the bread of the body of the world
And eat of it . . .
I saw the bread, but my mouth was sealed . . .

AT 29.

My darkest hour:
I lie in bed, my lungs ringed with an iron band of pain,
A tightening band when I breathe,
And a great carbuncle on my forehead.

Now if I could die, if I could slip away,
My epitaph, "He also is a Failure" . . .

Life is too heavy upon me . . . I have made a brave fight,
Fought alone against odds of the world and against the devouring God of the artist . . .
I have known the omnipotence of inspiration,
Hewed plain tales out of the rock of life,
Poured song, and drained and lost my soul . . .

But to be an artist, what is it?
Vision and unreality, where pain only has the sting of truth . . .
It is to be a whimpering child unable to carry the day's load,
And then one darkens, and hurls lightnings and slays love,
And then one lies inert in one's own deep waters,
And then terrific battle and omnipotence and creation,
And one goes as a god who becomes a whimpering child again . . .

Better to end it . . . I am not of the heroic stuff of the great . . .
My wife reads Sophocles to me and Homer,
My soul floats back to the singer's home in Greece,
I have dropped three thousand years of fever for the cool Hellenic calm . . .
Why write, when all is written?

Yes: I will put by the singer—
I ask for paper, and in my pain, through the long hours, I echo Greece in rhyme.

AT 29.

I have turned from sickness and death
To seek my soul in the movies . . .
I still believe in magic . . .

All the players are spoilt sweet children,
They are spiritual dwarfs . . .
They play forever in a pleasure-house of the imagination,
And he who is king today is beggar tomorrow . . .
They need no masks like the Greeks: they *are* masks . . .

I am strangely troubled and sensuously happy among them . . .
Caesar-Christ almost half believes he can play on the floor with dolls and fire-engines . . .
He writes romantic melodrama for the actors . . .
He feels himself the Brutus of his Caesar, the Judas of his Christ . . .

His intellect rises like a spire in the vast glass-roofed studio, for there is no mind there . . .
The players have jealous little egoes, petulant caprices, impatient whimsies . . .
They cannot understand his abysmal darkness . . .
He cannot understand, how, when the gong rings, and the director cries ready,
And in the painted scene the ghastly serpent-light inundates the actors,
And at last, in silence, the camera begins its clicking,
As by a magic wand these children are transformed into the characters of the play . . .
So lightly they move from world to world of self . . .

If he is on the height, he must stay there,
And if in the depth, he is manacled there . . .
He who desires nothing but a looking-glass world
Is even alien in the heart of this mirage . . .

And so he muses on America which he sees as a movie-land,
A clutter of mechanism in which the petulant children play,
And he who is beggar today is king tomorrow,
And over it all is the touch of quick money and quick results . . .

A world of hot excitements and dull indolences,
Of dreams that are bought and sold, of palaces reared and shattered,
A world of daubs, masks, patches . . . of towns put up overnight like the
scene in a play
And cast in the junk-heap tomorrow . . .
A bright forced artificial bloom that is partly painted decay . . .

He grows sick: in this original and native art,
America's art, art of the machine,
He seeks his soul and finds only alkali desert,
The Dead Man's Land of America at play.

AT 29.

There is a famous young actress in the movies . . .
She has black ringlets about her saucy face . . .
Her lustrous large eyes are black . . .

She is terribly young and innocent, the People's Darling,
And I am bent on trying to love her . . .
She plays with me a little: but always a brawny brainless English actor
keeps his eyes on us . . .

I am to write up her life for a magazine,
So she shows me her diary,
And I find matter there for close attention . . .

She is playing two men off against each other, and reckoning on the returns,
She is diabolical in her schemes for raising her salary . . .

I look at her afresh: and I see a too juicy mellowness in her youth,
And I marvel at what the love-struck youths and maidens who write her
from the Middle West
Would think of their darling if they read her diary . . .

Later, she shifts to a cheap company for a great salary,
Carrying her two men with her . . .
In three months she runs over the fat-line of the ingenue,
And in five months this star that shines like a Venus equally over the Rockies
and the Alleghanies
Is quenched and forgotten.

AT 29–30.

Lovey, our black cook, adores me.
Lovey is skinny bones, and looks like a witch in a wrapper and her hair spiked
in curl-paper;
A black Medusa, snake-topped . . .

"La," says Lovey, "this here nigger works her hands off for the likes of
you . . ."

She carries insurance for relatives and prays for their death . . .
She visits them in Virginia and comes back bearing in her arms a real honey-
sweet luscious Virginia ham . . .

And it's for me . . .
"Ah lugged it, and wore the skin off my arm, and got a hump on my back
for the likes of you" . . .

She adores the something mild in me, the poet, the dreamer.

She does not know me as my wife knows me . . .
One day I am at the telephone and suddenly a wild devilish fury possesses
me,
And my speech has the lightning in it . . .

Primitive Lovey is caught back in the jungles: she recognizes a magic
demon . . .
Thereafter she avoids me . . .

Perhaps now she really sees the soul of an artist
Possessed of heaven and hell.

AT 29–30.

I have met our most powerful novelist:
We walk along Riverside at sunset discussing the ultimates of life and death.

He envelops me with the mists of impalpable longing and rainy despair,
He is so huge in his hunger for communication, so inarticulate in his outpost loneliness . . .
Drenched with unsatisfied love he affects the swagger of power,
As of some heavy magnate, lumbering, large, a bit cross-eyed and heavy-jowled,
Dressed like a model, swinging a cane.

He has, indeed, the eye single . . . single to the terror and hurt of the world,
No multiple vision, but hard shortsightedness of mechanical facts,
Fangs and claws and money and disillusionment . . .
Yet tears spring from his soul, overpowered by beauty, seeing three girls dancing before a hand-organ.

I try to put a God in his brute universe,
And I think of him as a great tom-cat heavily sad and wistful because he is human.
I feel baulked, as if perhaps I too beneath my obvious optimism
Really believed as he did;
Especially, especially when he speaks of the life of the artist in America,
The puritan steam-roller, the weight of clammy morality,
The need of freedom, however heart-breaking . . .
My soul goes black when he says: "You know for the artist marriage is ruin."

He too has been in commercial work, he too is married,
He too is at the edge of a great adventure.

So we walk, we talk.
And here is the Hudson, the North River, with shouting gold of sunset and
smokes of the tugboats,
Shadows of cliffs, like the spacious threshold of a spiritual universe,
And I grow tense with the wonder of it and feel the artist's despair of ever
setting it down in words . . .
So I turn to him: "Just look," I say, "could you describe that?"
He speaks carelessly:
"Oh, yes—that or anything."

AT 29–30.

It is about ten o'clock: my wife and I have already gone to bed,
When the bell rings and in comes white-haired Horace Traubel.

We entertain him in our bathrobes,
And he laughs at us: for him the night has but begun:
Meanderings through dark streets, adventures among strangers, comrade-gatherings in tiny smoky rooms.

I feel shy and guilty before him:
It was he who saw Walt Whitman into death,
And he who fought Walt's fight through all these years.
Horace is a printer, gets out a little magazine, writes poetry,
But mainly gives us "With Walt Whitman at Camden."

Sunset glow from Walt is on Horace:
One feels Walt at one remove.
The man is simple, unaffected, tender, with a naïve and utter faith in the people,
With a religion that has revolution in it,
And brotherhood and commonplaces.
He is poor, and uncompromising.

I feel guilty,
Especially when he speaks of the danger of being a ten-thousand-a-year man,
And how Jack London has gone bad as an artist,
And the taint of the New York bunch.

Horace thinks I might yet do something, if I am not spoilt.
He makes my heart ache.

AT 30.

Why writing my stories do I go into such helpless rages against myself?
Why am I guilty before great books?
Why does Jean-Christophe fling me in a fever of despair?

O, I see now . . .
I see my whole life tossed between conformity and art,
Between compliance with America's Gods, Success and Gentility,
And the fierce demands to be strong and courageous and free,
A true artist . . .

I have compromised, I have sold out to look well in my family's eyes,
For crumbs of praise from acquaintances and editors I have betrayed my gifts,
I have gone against my essential nature—and to what end?
Misery: my own, my wife's, my two sons' . . .

But I am caught:
It is too late, I am too fixed in my habits; my golden chance was given me and I flung it away:
I have not the courage nor the will:
And am I really an artist after all?

I walk about the streets thinking: perhaps thirty years more,
Thirty years more of a false life,
And then deserved oblivion . . .
One more frustrated talent, one more divine possibility corrupted and slain,
One more American life . . .

AT 30.

Randall's Island on a grey day when the East River races foaming to the Atlantic
And the tugs ride by like supine souls carried by Destiny . . .

Grey barracks . . . prison cages . . . and blasted humanity . . .
I walk with the bright young medical, and a keeper of these crippled beasts . . .
And we move in an air of uncleansable human staleness
As if when souls decay they give off the fetid odour of a rotting God . . .
Here the spirit of man screeches its way into eternal mystery . . .

What world is this, strange, yet familiar?
These babbling vacant faces, these beggars and kings and courtesans and satyrs,
These crouching wailing animals using man's hands for feet,
These howling vision-haunted Christs,
These Gods prophesying for the world?

And why is the horror deepest in this artist who talks to me so quietly and sanely, with a gay laugh?
"New York over there," he points to the grey dirty city beyond the grey tide,
"That's the real asylum for the insane . . .
We, here, we are the sane . . .
You'd never guess it: yet it is so."

My spirit trembles . . .
I know that rapid river-tide and the soul supine in the drag of Destiny
And the sea of madness . . .
Who better than an artist knows the Deeps, strange yet familiar,
Where in the barracks of Self
One is God-drunk and God-damned in demonic ecstasies?

I am of these in the hour of song . . .
And I think of Nietzsche dissolving in the golden stupor,
And Hugo Wolf's shout that he was Jupiter,
And Dostieffsky foaming in epilepsy:
And I think of the great who dared the frenzy, lost in the Lear-storm and
the Walpurgis Night,
And conquered and came to peace . . .

When shall I dare again the last madness, my deepest fear?
Or is it not better to deny and cast out the artist?

But I am an artist; I know my kinship with the blasted . . .
And over the tides in the ferry I go, trembling,
Wondering why I am outside, while they are inside.

AT 30.

We had thought that our second son would bring us peace . . .
He is so good-natured, healthy and beautiful,
A golden boy . . .

Everybody adores him; he is full of laughter and fat chuckles,
And hardy as a nail . . .

He just begins to walk, and is funny on his feet . . .

But there is no peace: the air in our house has poison in it;
Though my wife and I muffle our quarrels and lacerate each other in secret,
The air is heavy with a ruined marriage . . .

And one morning I hear the little lad calling me,
And I go into his room, and he is trying vainly to stand up, clutching on
the rods of his crib . . .
But he cannot stand, he falls back, and looks at me appealingly . . .

I call my wife: something's gone wrong with his legs . . .
We wait breathlessly for the doctor . . .
Surely such things happen, but we cannot even think they will happen to us!
The doctor comes: he tests: yes, it is so,
It is infantile paralysis . . .

So there between us the golden fruit of our marriage is blasted,
And we a little see the symbol, the symbol . . .

AT 31.

Is this my wife and I, who talk so cleverly?
This is our favourite walk: the river road in the upper city along the Hudson:
This our favourite seat: looking under bare winter trees on the railroad tracks, the blue sun-running river, the cliffs beyond . . .

We are almost happy: it is so clean and clear and courageous to be nakedly candid . . .
For several years we have struggled in the hot passes of desperation,
Drugged ourselves with passion and play, with comforts and sicknesses and studies,
With friends and cleverness and cures;
But I have seen her stare pale from the window at one in the morning contemplating a fatal leap,
And she has seen me lie sick and near death, and resigned to death . . .
We have known that two human souls with most excellent intentions
May commit every crime and indignity and shame on one another . . .
We have seen our children tremble like untuned strings to every breath of our distorted spirits . . .
And yet we have gone on affirming love, duty, the home, marriage . . .

Now, as clear and fresh as the winter wind, is our witty candour . . .
I need not worry for her: she will be happier alone:
Nor she for me: I shall go down to Washington Square and be all artist . . .
We are free, our hearts sing, we are free . . .

A few days later, I say good-bye to the children and her . . .
Shall we kiss? Why not? . . . I go . . .
I sleep alone that night in a narrow hall bedroom
Feeling like one who is amputated and keeps putting out a hand for the missing limb . . .

AT 31.

Isn't it strange, that though I am thirty-one,
I have never really been alone in my life
But always with friends or family?

Loneliness, like death, was a word to me . . .
But now I know the very loneliness of death,
And the death-anguish . . .
I go about alone in the city, all day, all evening,
I lie and cannot sleep,
I am running, running from the death that has overtaken me . . .

What have I done?
Am I the hero, breaking the web of lies, to obey the life within me?
Am I only the artist, impossible for a woman to live with?
Am I guilty of a gross and scandalous crime against society?
Am I a child, longing for safety and comfort once more?

All moods dash me on the rocks of myself,
And, late at night, coming home across Washington Square
I give a loud cry of agony . . . the wrench and sweaty throes have begun,
The death-throes . . .
It seems I must go insane before such emotions . . .
They are, beyond thought, terrible . . .

A soft January morning comes . . .
I go sit in an empty train of cars and am rattled through winter landscape
to Coney Island . . .
I go down to the sand and the sea: I am alone by the sea . . .

I look out over grey-blue waters, and an intuition flashes . . .
My time has come for the sea . . .

In middle life we come to the sea, and must make the journey over the sea;
We say good-bye to all we loved, and now the crossing may be months and
years . . .
We seek a new land, a new life . . .

So Dante in the middle of his years
Was lost in the woods of self and descended into the Inferno of self,
And climbed up through the Purgatory of self,
And ascended, at last, the Paradise of self . . .
The great crossing, the journey in the visionary sea . . .

And so, sea-gazing,
In the vapours of my agony I heard a little murmur,
It was a ripple of tune, a breath of music,
It was an annunciation from the depths,
It was the discovery of the sublime and terrible world of self . . .
And I a little turned to it, and tears came, and song . . .

I was abashed by the song . . .
Shyly I showed it to my dear friend, the comforter and comrade of my
loneliness,
And he cared for it, and bade me go on . . .

So I went on . . . I wrote my Songs for the New Age . . .
And so the long crossing began for me . . .

It is amazing to see one's past like a receding shore
And to say: "I shall never return there" . . .
To feel the distance widening between you and it,
To lose it at last, save as phantasy,
To see the past as belonging to some other self
While you land on a new coast and almost in another world,
And you are not what you were . . .

So I see my life in the distance, its birth and death,
And it seems almost like the life of some one else . . .
I see it closed, yet I am here, still in the middle years,
And it seems amazing to have been all that, and yet to be living, with perhaps many more stanzas to be added to the song . . .

I am in the same city, and I cross and re-cross the same streets,
But it is not the same city and these streets are not the same,
For I am different . . .

This is the first day of Spring, and a Sunday,
The street, outside my open window, is shining on the north side with the sun,
The skies are a tender blue, a bird is flying along the roofs,
The air is indescribably fresh and touched with the eternal elemental sea and earth,
The church bells ring, it is Sunday morning . . .

I am idle in an isle of peace, for the book is written,
The song is closed . . .
I shall know a poet's holiday . . .

It shall not be long . . .
For Peace is afar and War is the breath of the artist's being . . .
When there are no more Gods to conquer, there are no more songs to sing . . .
I must grow as old as Prospero before I bury my magic wand
Certain fathoms in the earth . . .

March 21, 1920.

NOTE

For those who are interested in continuing where this book leaves off, there are the four volumes, beginning in 1914,

Songs for the New Age
War and Laughter
The Book of Self
The Solitary.

At some later time, after proper editing, excision and revision, I intend merging these volumes with the present one, to make the book hinted at in the dedication.

AS TO A NOVEL OF ONESELF

For some time now the realistic tendency in the novel has led the artist ever closer to the material of his own life. If he is to express life as he knows it, he must in the end offer his own life up for his art: here only is he at the centre of a true insight. So the novel has become more and more a thinly disguised autobiography, and the natural question that comes up is: will the artist now take the final step and give the novel of himself? Autobiography, as we know it, is a strictly censored affair, distorted for the obvious reason that only the famous write autobiographies that are read, and the famous cannot afford to tell the truth about themselves. There have, it is true, been Confessions, but Confessions are equally one-sided and distorted, since they hinge on a sense of guilt and a false attitude toward one's own past. Walt Whitman attempted a complete self-portrait, the good and the bad, but when we examine it closely we see, amazed, that he never really discloses himself in the sense that Dostieffsky discloses Raskolnikoff, or D. H. Lawrence discloses Paul in Sons and Lovers. We get an abstract Walt Whitman, a public type; we learn nothing about his personal experiences—all those things which the novelist seizes upon as of crucial interest.

Hence, so far as I can see, the task of applying the novelist's art to one's actual life remained to be done. How could one do it? To begin with, we all have distorted subjective pictures of ourselves: often heroic, sometimes pitiable. Then, there is too much material: any real remembering draws forth such a flood of details as to reach encyclopaedic proportions. Finally, won't we offend relatives and friends by putting them in a public work, and won't we offend the public by direct candour?

Doubtless such reasons have prevented the task from being accomplished, and doubtless I should never have put this dream to a hazard, had it not been for psycho-analysis. The process of psycho-analysis leads to some surprising conclusions: by opening up one's past and leading it out as a procession under the scientific spotlight of analytic psychology it slowly grows detached and objective, until finally it seems to belong to another person. Second, the prolonged process succeeds in grouping the important incidents and tendencies of one's life about a few nuclear events. Third, the sense of shame tends to disappear, and one is aware that psychology will lead

art and life to a quite new candour. Finally, one sees that it is oneself, and not so much relatives and friends, who is responsible for shortcomings and successes.

By this process, then, the ground was cleared for me, until my life lay before me in panorama, naturally objective and condensed, and freed enough from others to make it possible to deal with them, in the main, slant-wise and not quite direct.

Because of the scientific approach I think I can honestly say that I have recorded the first thirty-one years of my life as freely as any novelist treats of his hero's life.

Naturally, the gravest problem that confronted me was that of form. How write it? Would the novel form suit my purpose? Should it be a regular prose autobiography? What should it be?

In the end I had to find what I think is a genuinely new form. For some years I had been feeling for this form. It seemed to me that the novel was much too padded, expansive and cluttered, and that one could give modern realistic narrative the condensation one finds in a Greek or Shakespearian play. How do this without sacrificing the gains made by the novelists—the gains of naturalness, a freer and more immediate vocabulary, the richness of prose rhythms which allow complete flexibility in handling?

The first clue came in writing scenarios for the movies. I saw here that a series of dissolving pictures tended toward the condensation needed. I wrote a Life of Lincoln in three reels and it seemed to me amazingly vivid compared with even the best of biographies. It struck me that I might take the scenario and expand each scene into a prose or free verse paragraph and thus have a new kind of biography.

Finally, I wrote "The Beloved," a compromise between the old narrative form and the one that was developing in my mind. It was mostly poetic prose, intensified and subjective. But it was not really what I was seeking. . . .

I now turned to free verse and developed that medium (Songs for the New Age); and a little later Spoon River Anthology appeared, showing new possibilities in condensation. The problem remained: how apply this to narrative?

I first attempted The Life of Lincoln again, but gave this up. Then I wrote an allegorical poem, The Song of Life, in free verse, a step forward, but too far removed from the novel. Next I wrote a sort of psycho-analysis of self in brief free verse paragraphs. (Book of Self.)

With such a background I came to the present work, and found that, simply by retaining the novelist's speech, material, point of view, etc., all I needed now in order to achieve condensation was to use the free verse form. This for me has the same effect that classic verse had on others: I tend at once, automatically, to drop away inessentials, to go to the heart of the matter, to use a more vivid speech, to be more careful of style, and to pay more attention to rhythm. . . . One may understand how far-reaching the effect of form is, as well as of the analytic method, when

I say that actually about six to seven hundred thousand words of notes, covering a two-years' analysis, produced the small distillation of this book. It might have been a three-decker novel!

It will be noted that the work divides into two parts: that the first is a single long poem, and the second a series of short ones. This, I may say, was no deliberate choice of my own, but actually the way the work came to me. Several advantages accrue from this. It is as if first one saw the inside of the character, and then the outside; that is, first the general underlying mechanism with its very definite pattern is shown; the soul of the man; his deepest motivations and reactions; and then the procession of external events unwinds to give this spirit flesh and bones and definite human form and environment. In short, first a subjective account, then an objective: and since each of us has these two definite ways of seeing himself, the rather loose and even overlapping method of division makes for a gain in the complete and clear seeing. Put differently: first one sees the picture as a whole, then one studies the details.

I do not honestly know what the difference between prose and poetry is, and I do not really care what label is put on a literary work. The questions worth answering, however, are of this order:

Does the form fit?

Has the artist gained by using this form?

Is the work natural and interesting and inevitable?

And it is such questions the work itself must answer.

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